

Memoirs of a Savoy pageboy

by JOE MALONE

WELL I remember the war years. As a matter of fact, I was seven years of age when the Second World War broke out. I have vivid memories of scarcities. Poverty in Limerick was common amongst the working people. Most of the men had gone to England, that ever open safety valve. Most households had money coming from Britain. A familiar, and indeed a welcome sight was the wire-boy with the money orders from the cities of London, Liverpool and Birmingham. A phrase well known then was "Any sign of the wire boy?". The telegram boy would race into our area ever conscious of his mission. He would distribute his post and would get the odd tanner here and there. The telegram would be opened gingerly. It would be signed by the head of the house and cashed at the local huxter shop. Then the big vase would come down from the mantle-piece overflowing with pawn office tickets.

The pawn shops would remain open until 9 o'clock on Saturday evenings. One could see the long procession of people, children included, going through the English town over Baal's Bridge and into the Irish town, which we used to call pawn office land. A favourite pledge was a Communion suit or dress or Confirmation suit. Not always did the money arrive from London; it was very often spent in Ward's Irish House in London or The Malt Shovel in Birmingham. Wife desertion was common place; very often children were left hungry.

The Limerick pawn brokers were a benevolent breed of men. A strange thing: I've never seen a woman pawn broker. Pashee Browne, Dot Clifford and Mikey Jackson were the big three. If you were a good customer they would give you out the clothes if you paid the sixpence interest. Pawned on Monday, redeemed on Saturday, that was the life of a suit. It's no small wonder we had them for years. They spent more time in the pawn offices than on our backs. I remember being at home one Saturday night when we were fighting about whose turn it was to go to the hock shop. My mother left out an unmerciful roar, "For heaven's sake, don't bother yourself. They are in and out so often they'll find their own way home!"

With dabbling in the black market during the war years, the barter system took preference over cash deals. Flour, white of course, for tea, sugar for a bicycle tube or for nylon stockings brought in from England. Small soap making houses sprung up. In spite of all the poverty there was a unity of purpose which comes with sharing. Such was not the case with the merchants and the families of doctors and solicitors; they never knew any real want. A ton of coal for a chest of tea and so on.

In spite of the discomfort, I had a few lively war years, or as they were known then, "The Emergency" years. Mock battles, sirens blowing, the A.R.P. (Air Raid Precautions) men shouting in your letterbox "Lights out", only to be met with a concerted chorus of blasphemous language. We sang a jingle about the carry on.

Underneath the spreading chestnut tree,
Mr. de Valera said to me,
If you want to get your gas mask free,
Come and join the A.R.P.

Except for a bout of scabies, which most children contacted, to be followed by a sickening sulphur bath at the Dispensary, we never lost our sense of fun. We ran



Joe Malone, in 1947, with the Savoy girls.

through the back streets of Limerick, sometimes chased by the Guards. You had to be home before the news to listen to Lord Haw-Haw on the wireless or be locked out for the night. All the family would sit around the fire of turf and blocks. The turf was well watered by the merchants of Limerick. One of them was a well known sportsman. A parish priest and a politician fought hard - the one for new parishioners and the other for votes to build houses in the swampy Island Field - against the wishes of the T.B. doctor, as he was called then. The medical man was right: many people got tuberculosis and whole families were wiped out. It was poor consolation to be given a free pair of boots with G.P. stamped on them. (Government Property). As kids we thought it meant C.P. (Can't Pawn).

One pawnbroker in High Street, O'Brien, used to speak a little Irish. If you could ask or answer a question in Irish he would give you a penny. After putting my pawn ticket on the counter, I would shout "Conas ta tu". He would pat me on the head and say "Maith an garsun". Realizing that my conas was becoming old hat, I decided to learn a little more Irish. Now a crisis arose. Who was I going to ask? I couldn't ask the master because I was mooching from school. Nobody knew any Irish. I had an aunt on my father's side who spoke Irish but she was too posh to talk with anyone.

Then I got a brainwave. My uncle, who was living with us at the time, used to have nightly chats with a fellow British Army man, who had been in the Connaght Rangers. They would borrow tobacco from each other and I would be sent up to his house for a jot when my uncle ran short. I knew he spoke Irish because he used to say his prayers in that language. I saw my chance. "Jack", I said, "you can talk Irish, can't you?" "Yes", he said. "Well", I said, "can you tell me the Irish for pawnbroker?" He scratched his head and paused for a few seconds. "Pawnbroker", he said, "ah, yes, 'geallbhoicear'". "Thanks", said I, as I ran down home, repeating to myself what Jack had told me, I must have said it a hundred times.

So now I had a new word for O'Brien. Proud of my new found bit of Irish, I rambled up the Irish Town, past the market place smiling to myself. I stood in the long line at the counter which was about five feet tall. My heart began to throb. As I got near the counter O'Brien's assistant was behind the counter so I slipped back in the line to wait for the boss.

O'Brien often slipped out for a half-one to a pub called The Bed of Nettles. (This pub was the only bar in Limerick without a toilet and a woman friend of mine gave the pub its name while drinking there one night. After a few half-pints, she went out of the bar to a waste piece of ground next door to relieve some of the liquid pressure. While squatting she got badly burned the nettles. On her return to the pub she re-named it The Bed

of Nettles.) Back arrived O'Brien and gave me a wink. I hopped up on the counter and let fly in one breath, "Conus ta tu, mo geallbhroiceir?" His eyes lit up as he took my bundle and gave me twopence.

I had a choice of buying a Chester bun or stalling on to my twopence and going to the Thomond to the pictures. It was a case of filling the belly or filling the mind. So I thought to myself, God is good for tonight, and I bought the Chester.

Having been expelled from Creagh Lane School after a long and ignorant stay, I went to St. John the Baptist School. It was a one-storey building under the shadow of St. John's Cathedral in the heart of Garryowen. It had four masters who taught eight classes. They were men of gentle temper—more than I can say about the boys in black. I left there at the age of 13 years and six months, after breaking Guard White's melt, and just missing Glin Reform School by a hair's breath.

In my messenger boy days we were paid five bob a week. You spent your half-day cutting your boss's lawn. The payment for that job was a couple of apples, usually bad, or a cut of bread and jam. But I could never keep my eyes off the big fat maid who was kind of slow on top and who could blame her 16 years in the Good Shepherd Convent, mis-named because most of the girls came out of there fat, foolish and ill-prepared for outside the walls. If you didn't do the work to your boss's satisfaction your job might be gone the next day. The Protestant employers were far more decent than their counterparts, with a few exceptions.

Once we tried to organise a messenger boys' union, but we were threatened by the shop-keepers and jobs were scarce. They put the fear of God into us. So our attempts at forming a union died a sudden death. Some of the kids started work at 6 a.m., and after a long round on foot, starting from Catherine Street and finishing at Barrington's Pier, the young boys and girls had to walk back home, their hands blue with the cold. At home they ate a few cuts of brown bread and then went off to school.

After a few months as a messenger boy there was a job going at the Savoy Cinema as a page boy, or "buttons". My father was active in the trade union movement in the city and pulled a few strings with a man who later became a senator and vice-president of the union. I was very keen on this job. After the bike job it was full of colour, and I liked the idea of the uniform, pillbox hat white gloves and black patent shoes. Most important of all to my impressionable mind was the status. It meant the respect of your fellow messengers. Strutting through the city, going to the bank, the newspaper and other offices, I felt like a real glasscock and was proud as Punch when I heard an old woman say one day as I passed by, "Isn't he the real Ally Daly?" I really had notions about myself in those days, God help me.

The first picture I saw there was "The Keys of the Kingdom" with Gregory Peck. The cinema was owned then by the Ellimans and the company was known as Irish Cinemas Limited and also included the Savoy in Dublin and Cork and the Theatre Royal. The Ellimans were a very theatre-minded family and took a personal interest in the Savoy. They sold out to Odeon Theatres, and English company owned by Joseph Rank, who had a large interest in British film-making and produced many second-rate pictures. The British industry was then in its infancy. With a few exceptions picture-making in England was not in a healthy state. Richard Attenborough gave an accurate account of British film-making when he said it was all money and little talent. In the late forties, it cost one million pounds to make Hamlet, which was a financial failure. With Lawrence Olivier and Vivien Leigh playing leading parts it was wasted. The film was shown to empty cinemas all over Britain and America. Limerick had it for nine days. One evening I counted 11 people in a cinema with nearly 1500 seats.

Then came cinema variety, and celebrity concerts with

leading singers from Sadlers Wells, Convent Garden and other opera houses. I often thought to myself that they came to Ireland for the good food, steaks, mutton, beef and were flabbergasted at the sight of a butcher stall. England still had rationing. The artistes weren't paid much money but they enjoyed the Limerick audiences. Once I remember they gave a concert at the Limerick prison where the audience was entertained by Owen Brannigan, Gwen Catley, James Johnston and Victoria Sladen. We had concerts every Friday night with Stanley Bowyer at the famous Compton organ.

At that time the bishop would not allow Sunday pictures. After a long struggle by a lone Councillor, long since dead, the argument was won and we got pictures on Sundays.

Most of the artistes for the Sunday night concerts were local ones, such as Michael McNamara, James Penny, who could sing a C sharp, which he did in the Rossini Stabat Mater. Josephine Scanlon, Hilda Roche, Michael McCann, Delia Murphy and Elsie Mooney, were among the others who took part. Music, and especially opera, has a very long tradition in Limerick going back to the old Theatre Royal. The Bowyer-Westwood, Carl Rosa, D'Oyly Carte, Elster-Grime, the Clonmel-born singer Frank Land and, of course, our own Joseph O'Mara and his company were the leading lights.

The cine variety came in 1947/'48. The first performance I remember was by Frank O'Donovan, later to become Batty in 'The Riordans'. Frank also wrote a few songs, including 'Sitting on the Bridge Below the Town'. Limerick people were ardent cinema goers. Among the Savoy's regular patrons were Donogh O'Malley and his wife Hilda and that great playboy, Richard Harris. We spent a lot of our time trying to keep him quiet. There was also Paddy Clancy, who is now a successful fishmonger at Ellen Street corner and a fruit vendor on market days in the old part of the city. Paddy is still a well of information on the cinema. Maybe he should have become an actor. He is certainly a talented mimic.

When cine variety came, it brought artistes from all over the world. Europe was still in a shambles after the war. Theatres, cinemas were blown to smithereens. The musicians, singers, dancers, acrobats had limited outlets so neutral Ireland was the ideal place. Russian dancers, Hungarian acrobats, singers from Poland came with many more. We in Ireland were starved for good entertainment. The artistes needed an audience and some good food. After a few weeks of variety which was not a financial success, someone got a brainwave. Eddie Byrne was doing a programme in Dublin called 'Double or Nothing', with full houses most nights of the week, so Limerick had a go. That was the beginning of a very colourful career for Eamonn Andrews, who was the right man for the job. He had all the qualities, charm, unaffected manner of a man who liked people. He was also cool and a hard worker. He used to do a live programme on radio every Monday for the Imco cleaning concern called 'Spotless and Stainless' and be back in Limerick on the same afternoon - if he didn't crash into a pub or Garda barracks, which he once did.

I was asked to do the show, looking at it every day and night, I had a fair idea about the routine. Just as I was about to go on stage, he arrived with bits of straw hanging from his hair. He looked more like a cattle dealer than a quiz master. Being a champion amateur boxer made him a great favourite with Limerick people, there being a strong tradition of boxing in the city. The Savoy was well known for its staging of boxing tournaments, including Ireland v England, Ireland v Belgium, and Ireland v Wales. Many of the tournaments were brought to Limerick by Jim Casey, the man who became Mayor after the two Mayors, Clancy and O'Callaghan, were murdered. Another active man in the promotion of sport in the city was Dermot O'Donovan. St. Bridget's and St. Frances were the two leading clubs at the time.

The Savoy was a focal point for all these activities. It was a meeting place, especially the snack-bar, and its famous dish of tripe and mash was great for soaking up the porter. Boggy men, horsey men, bookies and retired jockeys, were among the regulars. Some of them retired quite young for reasons best known to themselves. "Thumbs Up" was the most notorious of the lot of them. He was a retired jockey, about four foot six in height, and wore a large peak cap, jodhpurs and a faded Crombie overcoat, a regalia which, like himself, saw better days. He made a slight mistake at Longchamp and the French Racing Board gave him his marching papers. He finished his days giving tips to some District Justices, one of whom he pushed at Listowel Races. The same Justice had to bail him out that evening. "Thumbs Up" was a funny little man, whose wife was a large country woman. They would have a few jars together during the day, and at night they would part company. He would then go to his digs and she would go to hers, which was a vault in a graveyard three miles outside the city.

Two other characters well known to the snack bar and indeed the Savoy stage, were the poet Ryan and Major Roche-Kelly, who lived as a recluse in Cappanty More at the foot of the Clare Hills. He was an ex-British Army man who was badly shell-shocked and had little to say. When Ger Ryan was feeling poorly, as he would say himself, he would take part in the quiz and easily win the Jackpot. He would then adjourn to the Bedford Hotel and the next day the Major would repeat The Poet's performance. That went on for weeks. The two familiar drooped figures would cross from the Savoy smiling like two children who just got money from their favourite aunt. They were crossing the street at their usual slow pace when a big motor car came down the street, jammed the brakes on and wound down the window. The woman driver left a roar like a bull out of her, "Do you think you own the road?" The Poet frowned, dropped his thick eyebrows, and said in a sharp biting tone, "Madam, I wonder who owns the car?"

Alas, their good time was coming to an end. Andrews twiggled the caper. He walked into the snack bar and sat between The Poet and the Major, who were plotting their next move. He called three glasses of sherry and said, "Gentlemen, I think we'll call it a truce". The Poet, with his usual charm, lifted his glass and smiled.

A frequent visitor to the snack bar was a tall man dressed in a white trench coat, a soft hat, a piercing look and one eye that always seemed to be closed. He spoke out through the side of his mouth, I knew he was an I.R.A. man. After he had come in a few times, my curiosity got the better of me and I asked Rose the waitress who he was. She smiled and said, "I thought you knew him". "No", I said. "That's the famous Eric "Lanty" Hanigan, Lanty was the officer who trained Brendan Behan and Cathal Goulding in explosives in the Dublin mountains for the I.R.A. bombing campaign in England". Another visitor was a detective named Kenny who seemed to be very interested in Lanty's movements. Kenny, I was to discover some time later, had shot a Republican up the country somewhere and was posted to Limerick. For his own safety he used to carry a gun. The day Lovely Cottage won the Grand National, he came in flustered drunk and waving his gun. I managed to get the gun from him, wrapped it in his overcoat, pushed him into the cloak room, locked the door and left him to sleep it off. It was about that time some of the bookies left Limerick in a hurry. Some wag wrote on one bookie's window above his name, "Also Ran".

The most colourful pair to appear on the stage in my time were Jack Doyle, all six feet three inches of him, with a red rose in his button hole, and Movita, with a head of massive black hair, dark beautiful eyebrows and brown eyes. She just about reached his shoulder, as they both sang their favourite song 'South of the Border'. Movita sang 'The Kerry Dances'. She didn't have a very

big voice but she sang in a charming way.

I met Jack in 1970 in a pub in London called The Hoop. He was pretending to tear up £5. I was reading the Irish Press when he left a roar at me, "Paddy, come and join us", which I did. We had a sing-song and when I told him that I brought his bags from the Limerick Railway Station he paused for a few minutes and shouted to the barmaid, "Two large Jamesons". The two girls behind the counter who were from Thomondgate were getting a great kick out of our antics. We sang for hours until Jack got a phone call; he was due to sing at an Irish night in Camden Town.

My memories of the Savoy days would not be complete without a mention of Jimmy O'Dea, Maureen Potter and that well known stone mason and fine baritone Denis Cox. O'Dea was always a favourite with the Limerick audiences, especially if you could hear the sly jokes which was a very effective trick to get the first six rows laughing and then he had the whole house in the palm of his hands. Winston Churchill was one of the statesmen he used to send-up but, looking back, Napoleon was his man. He would take his stance, drop one eye and stare at the audience with magnetism. The whole audience would go into an uproar.

One Sunday night O'Dea and Cox were coming through the back stalls door. I was instructed not to leave anyone into the cinema. I put my hand across the door and said, "Sorry gentlemen, you can't go through, there's a show on". O'Dea looked at Cox; the two of them looked at me. (We were all about the same height). O'Dea said in a caustic voice, "Out of my way, young man, or I'll put you down the street talking to yourself". With that he gave my pill-box hat a thump knocking it down over my ears, stormed down the middle and left me to the height I grew. Denis and Jimmy later measured me with a tape borrowed from magician Albert Le Bas. My lack of inches was always a joke between them.

Then came the opening of the Feile Luimini by Sean T. O'Kelly. I was appointed to act as page to the President. After weeks of drill in William Street Garda Station under Sergeant Morgan, and after perfecting the Presidential salute, we were all set for the big night. Out of a big black motor car hopped this jovial little man, beside him a fine big stately woman. After the salute we went into the cinema. I walked too far ahead of the President and found myself beside Bean Ui Cheallaigh. I got a tap on the head from his aide to allow O'Kelly to walk beside his wife.

The next day I was in Luke Larkin's bookie office studying the form, which was illegal because I was under age, but knowing Luke so well he turned a bling eye. While looking over an old woman's shoulder at the Cork Examiner, I overheard her saying to a fellow punter, "Isn't the President looking like a little dote?" The caption read: "President and wife open Feile Luimini." I looked again. Sure enough, there I was with my pill-box perched on the side of my head right beside his wife and Sean T. behind my back.

The most colourful manager in my time was 'Uncle' Cliff Marsden who first came to Limerick to cover a story for Fox Movie News about two German fliers. He came back to Limerick in about 1948. When he died in 1953 he got a military funeral, much to the surprise of many of his friends who did not take him too seriously. But many a head shook when they found out he was one of Michael Collins agents, though he was English. George Brent, who was in Limerick buying horses at the same time, was also a dispatch rider with Collins. I saw Marsden and Brent having a great chat; no doubt it was about the old days. Father Flanagan of Boys' Town fame was at the Savoy but he didn't live up to his reputation. He was a bitter man and he certainly didn't have the angelic smile of Spencer Tracey when he berated Mickey Rooney for his childish prank in the film about the priest's work.