

# From enthralled fan to being the star of the show

By SUZANNE MURPHY



Ms Murphy as Minnie in *Fanciulla del West* at Birmingham Hippodrome, 1991.

AS A child, one of the greatest treats during the Easter holidays, was to be taken to see the current production at The Cecilians. Some of my earliest memories are of Kay Condron, in (either Student Prince or New Moon), Helen Vaughan playing a French maid complete with broken English accent, opposite a very dishy Noel Harris, and Jim Griffin in a hilarious rendition of "I've gotta motto" in a production of "The Arcadians" that had the audience rolling in the aisles.

I sat, enthralled, in the audience, lost in a world of make-believe, wishing my young life away, so that I could soon be grown up, out of school and up on that stage.

Throughout the years on holiday



Cecilians celebrate

in Kilkee I had met Fr. Bates and Fr. McMahon, who I knew ran the Society, and they had always promised (jokingly, of course) that I could join as soon as I wished.

The summer I left school, I started a secretarial course at Mrs. Mac's High School and spent my evenings learning one or two pieces for my audition. I must have driven the neighbours crazy, singing the same songs hour after hour so that I would make a great impression and be 'Discovered.'

The audition must have gone well, for I was accepted as a member of the ladies chorus and set about learning my music with great enthusiasm.

To begin with, we met once a week, men one night, and ladies another, so that we could learn our parts separately, and I couldn't wait for the joint rehearsals, so that we would have the full effect of the harmonies, and get a chance to dance and move about the stage with real men!!! Well — at school we only had other girls to dance with, and this was now, real life.

Imagine my delight when, in my first year, Michael O'Doherty, who was producing "Naughty Marietta" gave me an opportunity to play the comic role opposite Jim Griffin, with Kay Condron and Michael Yelverton playing the romantic leads . . . That was it . . . I was stagestruck.

As far as I was concerned, the day job in insurance was only a stopgap until I got the opportunity to sing or act fulltime, and preferably both together. Mind you, I had absolutely no idea about how to bring this idea to fruition.

At about this time, I took it into my head to have singing lessons with Mrs. Baker, just down from my office, in O'Connell Street, much to the annoyance of Fr. Bates who felt the natural voice would be ruined with training!! or perhaps he thought I would start getting ideas above my station.

I confided my aspirations of becoming a professional singer to her, only to be told that I did not have the strength . . . "too pink and white" were her actual words . . . So I bided my time.

The late Louis de Courcy who was a great friend, had taken over stage management and lighting and organised several trips to other societies to hear performances of repertoire that was being considered for the following year, and I was enjoying every moment of these outings.

Being involved at The Crescent, meant that I also drifted into the choir at the Jesuits and of course around Easter time, each year, one's loyalties were severely tested. You couldn't be up singing at the late ceremonies in Holy Week and give of your best at the final rehearsals before the grand opening on Easter Sunday, and Fr. Bates left one in no doubt of that.

Fr. Joe Marmion was in charge of the choir and also produced the school operetta. Some of us in the Cecilians came to help with the makeup and costumes and one production in particular sticks in my memory . . . The Gypsy Baron. This played to full houses, with the parents and friends helpless with laughter at the sight of refined and artistic "young ladies" in crinolines, tearing into a dance routine as though it were a rugby scrum.

One evening, having gone through an assembly line of young lads including "D" Power, Dessie Deany and my brother Michael, with pancake makeup, eyeshadow and lipstick, and breathing a sigh of relief when they all trooped upstairs for the

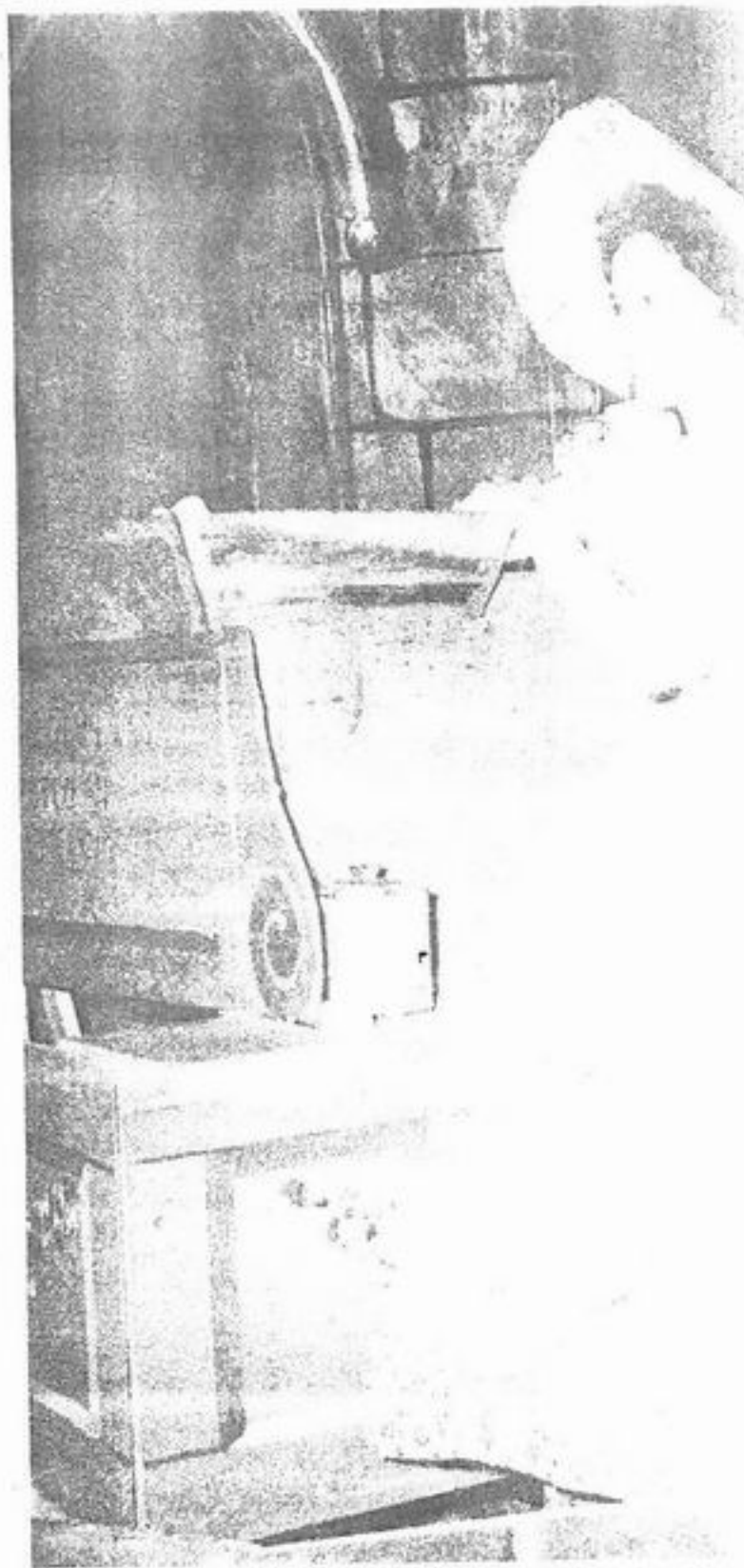
opening chorus, one youngster decided at the last minute to go to the loo. Fr. Marmion was on his way to the orchestra pit, and in exasperation, shouted at the luckless lad . . . "Hurry up, and get on that stage . . . and . . . DON'T SPLASH YOUR DRESS." We collapsed with laughter.

FR. Oliver O'Brien became director of the choir and music director of the Cecilians, and conducted performances of *Die Fledermaus*, in which I sang Adele. Now that I have sung Rosalinda in a professional production, I realise how difficult the role of Adele actually is.

Some years ago, whilst on holiday at home, I called to see Louis, and as we sat and chatted about old times, he told me that he had a tape of one of those performances and he promised to run off a cassette for me.

The emotion that that tape churned up was incredible . . . I could visualise the production quite clearly, with Mareta O'Hehir, Noel Mulcahy, Richard Murray, and John Du Santoy Reed, as a very funny Alfred.

I was quite put out by the fact that, when I asked my parents why they didn't tell me that I could sing so well all those years ago, they said that it was really nothing to get excit-



Suzanne Murphy as Lizette in the Cecilians *Marietta* at Easter 1960.

ed about, because there were others who were as good and much better than I in Limerick at the time, and when I think about it, of course, they were right.

At Mrs. Baker's house there were others studying with her like Stephen and Sean O'Shea, George Vaughan, Eddie O'Sullivan, Bidy McGrath, and at the Cecilians people like Hilda Moore, Terry Eggleston, Terry and

Jim O'Neil, O'Halloran, O'Malley, many of the King of the turban from

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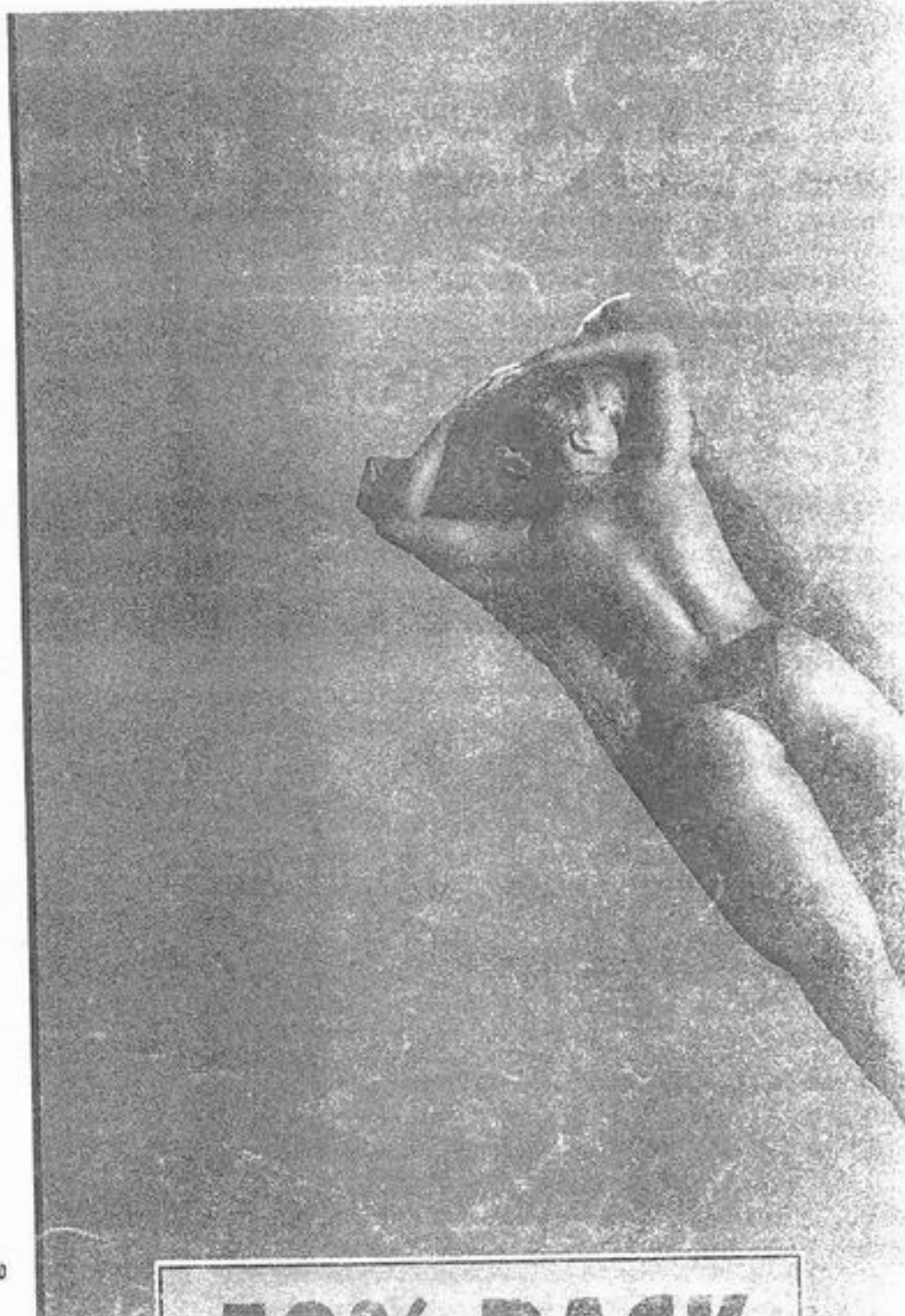
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FOR EACH



# enthralled being the the show

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Moore, Terry Eggleston, Terry and

Jim O'Kelly, Michael Burns Eddie  
O'Neill, Kay Griffin, Gerry  
O'Halloran, Pam Waterman, Eoin  
O'Moore, Jim Sexton and many,  
many others.

I do remember upsetting the ladies  
of the chorus in a production of "The  
King and I" because I had the bril-  
liant idea of covering my blond hair,  
turban style with a black mantilla,  
from school, to give the idea that I

had dark colouring (there being no  
wigs available). Mick Dock, the pro-  
ducer thought that this worked very  
well, and the other ladies were told  
to do likewise I was not popular, I  
can tell you.

They were great days, especially  
on the build up to opening night,  
when we rehearsed all hours, every  
evening and all day Saturday and  
Sunday.

The first rehearsals in costume and  
makeup, the thrill of singing with the  
orchestra, and the feeling of anticipa-  
tion of the audience's reaction, has  
never left me.

Of course, the anticlimax, when  
the week's performances finished,  
was terrible, and one had to return to  
normal life. In the office, I continued  
my role of entertainer, going through  
my repertoire for the girls with  
whom I worked, Phil and Nuala . . . .  
but only when Jack Hall, our boss,  
was out and we were quiet and bored  
with filing.

I began to get itchy feet, and want-  
ed to move to Dublin, and the deci-  
sion was made for me, when Louis,  
who was on the casting committee,

came around to the office to tell me  
that I was being considered for the  
comic role in the next production. By  
this time, I really wanted to play a  
romantic role (but did not have the  
looks or temperament) and told  
Louis so . . . . He burst out laughing  
at the idea, I took umbrage, dug my  
heels in, and said if I didn't get the  
lead, I didn't want any part . . . . and  
that was that. Needless to say I did  
not get the role, and in fact had to  
wait for all the romance and drama  
of the operatic stage . . . . but that's  
another story.

I have wonderful memories of my  
days in the Cecilians, and feel that if  
the seed of my present career were  
sown at school, they began to blos-  
som on the stage of The Crescent  
Hall.

Long may the Cecilians continue  
to capture the imagination of young  
actors and singers and help them on  
their way to fulfil their dreams.

Happy 75th birthday.

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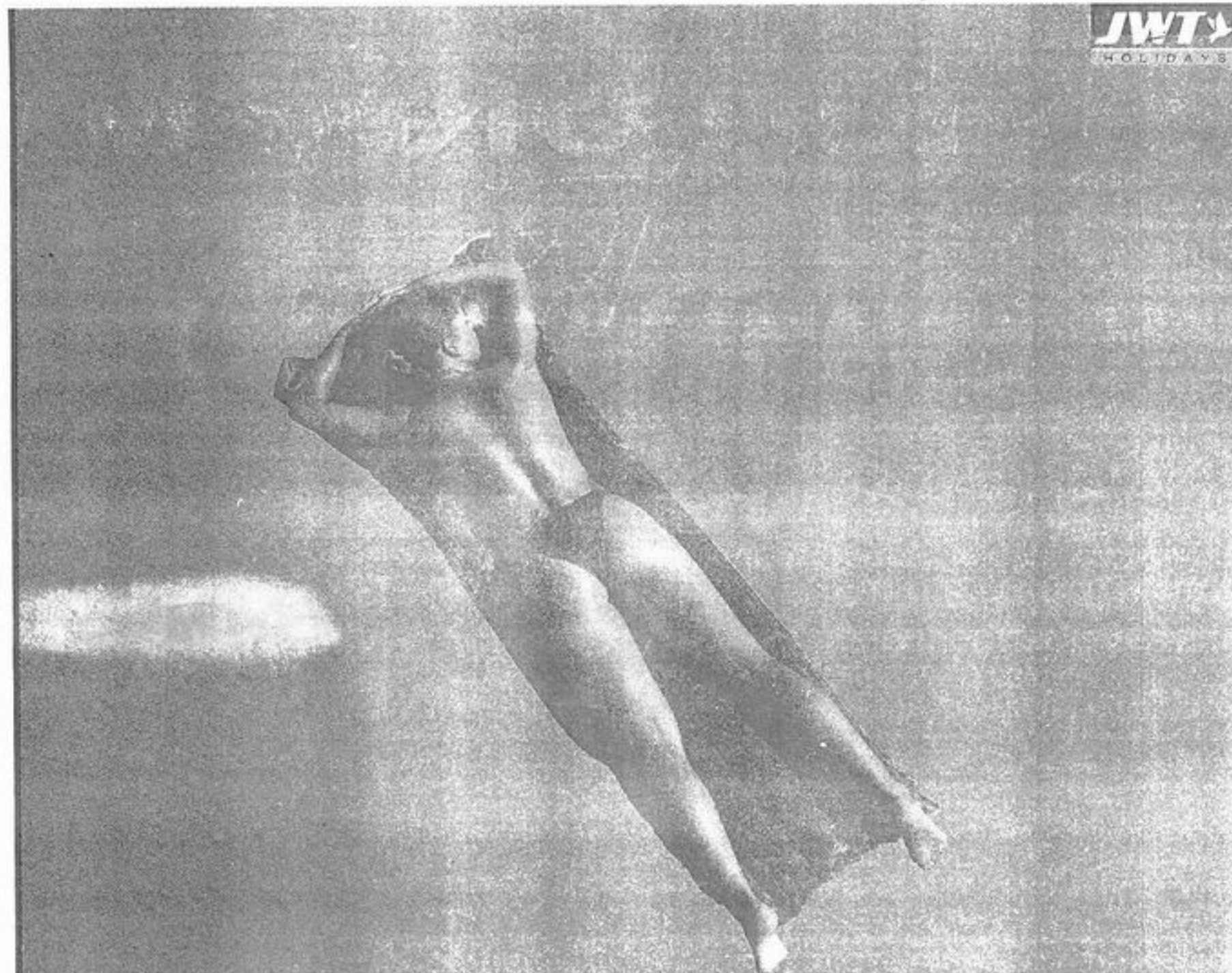
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