

The old Theatre Royal

by J.F. Walsh



The Theatre Royal. Drawing by J.F. Walsh.

The older generation of Limerick people remembers with affection the Theatre Royal in Henry Street. It was the second theatre in the city to bear the name. The first Theatre Royal was built in 1770 by one Tottenham Heaphy in Cornwallis Street, now Lower Gerald Griffin Street, and was destroyed by fire in 1818. In 1810 another theatre was built in George's Street, now O'Connell Street, but after a brief career of some twelve years was purchased by the Augustinian Fathers and converted into a church. Limerick remained without a theatre until in 1841 Joseph Fogerty purchased a plot of ground in Henry Street and on it erected a new Theatre Royal, a dwelling-house for himself and a row of houses in the lane off Lower Mallow Street, known as Fogerty's Range or Theatre Lane.

The theatre was a one-storey building, with the main entrance in the centre of the Henry Street frontage. At first this was a columned portico fitted with double doors, somewhat similar to the entrance to the County Club, but following damage by storm about the year 1900, the portico was removed and at a later date a verandah was built to replace it. At the left was the entrance to the stalls, and on the right, around the corner of the lane, was the entrance to the gallery. On the parapet over the main entrance was the royal coat of arms; on the roof a louvered ventilator, surmounted by a weather vane. The building was compact and could accommodate 1,300 persons. For some years after the destruction by fire of Dublin's Theatre Royal, the Limerick theatre was the largest in Ireland.

Classical figures in chalk on pedestals ornamented the vestibule, and its walls, as well as those of the lobby leading to the stalls were adorned with pictures of

famous actors and actresses, including one of Catherine Hayes. At the end of the stairway leading to the circle stood two wooden figures of soldiers in armour, which had at one time adorned the band wagon of Thady Cooney's Circus. To the right was the foyer leading to the pit. Inside, the floor sloped towards the stage, the pit being divided from the stalls by a barrier, and while the seats in the latter were padded and had back-rests, those in the pit were merely hard wooden forms. Round the sides of the building above the pit ran the circle, terminating in two stage boxes at each end. High above was the usual gallery, or rather "Gods", as it was familiarly called, and here, as in all theatres, the habitués were wont to voice their approval, and on occasion their disapproval of the show.

Obtaining entrance to the theatre during the run of a popular show was, in those pre-queue days, a feat in itself. Might was right. One joined the elbowing, jostling crowd where possible, and took part in the pushing and shoving until at last, breathless but happy, one was forced through the entrance. All the while an attendant at a side door enticed the more wary with his call of "Early doors, sixpence extra." The usual prices of admission were, circle, 3/0; stalls, 2/6; pit, 1/-; gallery, 6d.

Up to the advent of electricity, the house was lighted by gasaliers suspended from the gallery balcony, over the circle. The stage was spacious and the theatre was so constructed that no matter what part of the house one was in, the stage never appeared far away. The drop-screen - a work of art in itself - had been painted by Henry O'Shea, a well-known artist in those days. In the centre Shakespeare stood, under a pillared cupola, scroll in hand and leaning on a low column. Seated on steps, one

THEATRE ROYAL,
LIMERICK.

THE LIMERICK OPERATIC SOCIETY
IN
GILBERT AND SULLIVAN'S COMIC OPERA—

PATIENCE

Or, Bunthorne's Bride.

BY PERMISSION OF H. B. F. GIBSON, LONDON.

In aid of the Poor of the City and Lady Shaw's Fund for Comforts for the Royal Munster Fusiliers.

UNDER DISTINGUISHED PATRONAGE
WEEK COMMENCING

MONDAY, 24th JAN., 1916.

FOR SIX NIGHTS AT 9 P.M.

"In aid of the Poor of the City and Lady Shaw's Fund for Comforts for the Royal Munster Fusiliers".

at either side, were two female figures, one representing Music and Comedy, with a lyre and a mask, and the other, Tragedy, with a poison-cup and dagger. Underneath ran the caption, "All the World's a Stage". There was another curtain of heavy dark material that fell to indicate the conclusion of a performance, and time and again great actors and actresses had to come on in front of this to make their final bows. Running right across the top was a long canvas panel with the Royal Coat of Arms in the centre. This panel had been over the stage of the theatre in George's Street originally.

Touring companies, often direct from London, on tour to Dublin and Cork, came to Limerick with operas, musical comedies, plays and dramas, so that the patrons of the old Royal were well catered for. In addition there were local amateur productions, comic operas, plays, pantomimes, concerts and school entertainments, as well as balls, political meetings and other functions. To attempt to give an account of all of these would be beyond the scope of this article, and I will only recall some of the more outstanding events.

Musical productions were always the most popular and the music-loving Limerick people gave pride of place to opera. Who can forget those companies, great in their day, Arthur Rousby's, Carl Rosa, Moody Manners, O'Mara, D'Oyly Carte, and last, but not least, the Elster-Grime, recalling, as it does, memories of the ever popular Frank Land. The early appearance of John McCormack here was an event. Madama Clara Butt enthralled Limerick, but the scenes of enthusiasm when our own Joe O'Mara came excelled them all. The thunderous applause of his townsmen shook the very rafters of the building as they encored him again and again. Surely he never sang so well as in the old Royal.

Musical comedies were always in demand and the music of "The Bell of New York", "San Toy", "The Flying Dutchman", "The Messenger Boy", and the splen-

didly staged "Gay Gordons", with Stanley Brett and Mai Ashe, will long be remembered. Many people famous in the world of music appeared there, as did many famous bands, including Sousa's outstanding musicians.

Some of the greatest Shakespearian actors faced the footlights of the Royal, and held the audience spell-bound; F.R. Benson (afterwards knighted), one of the greatest actors of his time and a true sportsman; Norman V. Norman, Osmonde Tearle, Ian McClarne, Madame Bandom Palmer, Alexander Marsh and Carrie Bayly, are some who come to mind.

The Victorian melodramas were real thrillers, and of these, the most memorable was "East Lynne". This usually moved the ladies in the audience to tears, and even made it hard for the men to suppress their emotions. "The Nugget of Gold" was another thriller, recalling to mind S.F. (William) Cody, who attired as Buffalo Bill, used to ride about the town accompanied by his troop of "Red Indians". He was an excellent marksman and could shoot a glass ball off a man's head, or a clay pipe to pieces. One of the most spectacular scenes in his play was that in which a horse fell from a broken bridge on to the stage below. In the light of his later interest in aeronautics, it is interesting to recall that while on a visit to Limerick, the "Colonel" had a pleasure boat towed up the river by a large kite.

Kennedy Millar specialised in Irish dramas, such as "Seamus O'Brien", "Michael Dwyer", "Conn, The

THEATRE ROYAL
LIMERICK.

WEEK COMMENCING MON. JAN. 23rd 1922.

PICTURES AND VARIETY
EACH EVENING 6.45 AND 9 O'C.

CHARLIE ROBINSON
IRELAND'S WELL-KNOWN BARTONE
AND RACONTEUR

SPECIAL ENGAGEMENT

O'HARA
AND LITTLE MIKE
In Irish Comedy Sketch

The poster of the last show before the fire, January, 1922.



After the fire. "The curtain had come down for the last time".

Shaughraun", and "The Colleen Bawn". His plays were well staged and never failed to arouse the patriotic feelings of the audience. The scenes depicting the capture of Lord Edward in "Lord Edward Fitzgerald", the escape of Seamus O'Brien from the gallows, and the shooting of Danny Mann and rescue of the Colleen Bawn were most realistic.

To omit, what was an annual event, "Pool's Myriorama", would be unforgiveable. As a vivid and interesting entertainment it was unsurpassed and was looked forward to by young and old each year. This entertainment took the form of a conducted tour of many lands. Large pictures of famous places, painted on canvas and worked on rollers, passed across the stage, sometimes with beautiful lighting effects. There were also pictures of topical interest. One picture that always created a sensation was the blowing up in Havana docks of the U.S.S. Maine, complete with sound effects. In contrast to this was a picture of Milan Cathedral, beautifully illuminated by night. In addition Pool's always had a good orchestra and a programme of variety turns. Pool's first introduced "Living Pictures", as they were then called, to Limerick, and I can remember some Boer War pictures meeting with such a hostile reception that the gallery was closed for several nights.

Even in those days Limerick was not lacking in amateur talent. The Limerick Operatic Society produced the Gilbert and Sullivan operas for several sessions under the baton of Joseph P. Bellens, and from time to time Paul Bernard and Kendal Irwin produced some beautiful pantomimes. Saint Michael's Temperance Society specialised in Irish dramas, in which that veteran amateur actor, Tom Duggan, invariably filled a leading part. The Gaelic League concerts and plays of St. Munchin's College, of Crescent College and of the Christian Brothers' Schools produced some brilliant shows.

The audience, while there to be entertained, were keen critics, but it was in the "Gods" that the real "critics" arrayed themselves. They seldom left any performer in doubt as to what they thought of his merits or demerits as an actor, and indeed amongst themselves, frequently displayed no mean talents as popular entertainers. The better known "Gods" artists were often called upon to render songs or mouth-organ solos during stage intervals. At all times they displayed a wit that if sometimes a little forceful, was generally shrewd and penetrating, but on the whole their humour was without malice. Prominent

patrons of the stalls came in for the usual quota of good-natured banter, and many a prominent local personage had his dignity impaired by a chorus of "Good night, Jim. Come in and take off your hat". Many a youthful swain who brought his young lady to the stalls was importuned by the "Gods" to "Buy her a box of chocolates", and he generally did, to their mutual embarrassment and the delight of the "Gods".

Hunt balls, too, were held in the Royal. For these the seats and floor boards were removed, making available the excellent dance floor beneath. The decorations usual for such events were put up, and the scene during the dance was a gay and colourful one. Less picturesque, but on occasion not less exciting, the political meetings which were held in the old theatre. Of these I remember well the Unionist meeting in October, 1912, which led to three nights of rioting in the city and the boycotting of the theatre for over a week.

With the coming of films, plays became less frequent, and, except for concert-parties and variety shows, there were few stage productions. Actors and actresses, waggons of scenery and costumes were replaced by a few tin cases of film. The first projectors were noisy; fire-proof operating boxes were unknown, and it was not until much later that the danger was realised and laws made to ensure the safety of the public. The orchestra was reduced to a piano, two violins and a 'cello, and even these were dispensed with when the "talkies" came. Such names as "Fatty" Arbuckle, John Bunny, Flora Finch, Ford Sterling and his Keystone Police, and, greatest of all, Charlie Chaplin, will recall for many of us the antics of the early screen comedians, who seem to us now to have been much funnier than the players of to-day. The boys revelled in the adventures of Buck Jones and Tom Mix of cowboy fame.

The theatre passed from the Fogerty family, with which it had so long been associated, to an English actor, George Abel. On his death, a short time later, it was sold to William Shanley, who continued to operate it with pictures and variety shows.

On the afternoon of Monday, 23rd January, 1922, the alarm of "Fire" at the old Theatre was given, and within a few hours, despite every effort to save it, Limerick's Theatre Royal was burned to the ground. The curtain had come down for the last time on the old Royal of happy memories.