

The Tivoli Cinema on Charlotte's Quay (1916-1959)

by Joe Coleman

The Tivoli Cinema on Assembly Mall (Charlotte's Quay) opened in 1916, replacing the National Theatre, formerly known as 'The Gaff'. It was a Mecca for theatre goers at the turn of the twentieth century. Courtney's Theatre had originally opened on this site in September, 1821. This playhouse provided good clean entertainment and for years, it was well patronised, mostly by people from the locality which was heavily populated. Earl Connolly wrote that they had the most versatile of stage companies. They included the Fergusons with Carrie (mother of Harry Bailey), and the almost legendary Bert Deval whose 'dying' scenes were so popular that he gave encores and died all over again. He later returned to England, and took fond memories of the many theatre seasons in Limerick.

The Tivoli opened as the Tivoli Picture Palace and was later known as the Tivoli Cinema. It had a seating capacity of 600 and was owned by Paul Bernard, who was a talented amateur violinist, photographer and historian who lived on O'Connell Avenue. He also owned the Grand Central Cinema on Bedford Row, and had a well-known bicycle shop in Rutland Street. For all the plush and pretense of the uptown cinemas, there was no comparison with the comicality and phantasmagoria than went on in the two downtown gaffs, which were the Tivoli and the Thomond in Nicholas Street. They were great social outlets for residents of St. Mary's parish and hinterland for over half of the twentieth century.

The first picture play produced by an Irish company running at the Tivoli was the drama *O'Neill of the Glen*, by a Limerick man, W. J. Lysaght, who had brought a lot of native genius to bear on the creation of his characters. The five actors in the cast were Irish. One of the early pictures shown at the house in 1916 was *Macbeth* which featured Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree and Miss Constance Collier. The film was produced by D. W. Griffiths, who



Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree and Constance Collier in *Macbeth*

earned notoriety as producer of the film *The Birth of a Nation*.

The behaviour of the patrons was always very unruly, and it was just as well the films had no sound as one would not hear a word of what was being said. If there was a scene where a heroine was rescued, there was a huge cheer from the audience. When Ms. Griffin was on duty in the stalls, there was little messing, even from the toughest in the house, as there was always a danger of getting a belt of her torch on the back of the pole. The messing did not just start with the cinema days; they were at it even from a much earlier date, when it was known as 'the Gaff'.

Denis O'Shaughnessy recalled that on one famous occasion, Shakespeare's play, *Richard III*, was being performed and the King, unsaddled during the heat of battle, exclaimed: "A horse, a horse, my Kingdom for a horse." A wit from the Park area shouted up: "Would an ass do?" When the tumult died down, his victim brilliantly replied and said: "Yes. Will you please step on stage?"

The Tivoli was damaged by a fire in 1920, but it quickly reopened for business. Jack Ryan came from Newport and moved to John Street in 1930. Jack recalled that the pictures were cheap in those days, but money was scarce, it was usually 2d for admission. He recalled some of the follow ups or serials. The serials were in abundance, with such films as, *Hawk of the Wilderness*, *Daredevils of the Red Circle*, the exciting *Zorro's Fighting Legion*, the 15 episode *Drums of Fu Manchu*, with young Henry Brandon as Dr. Fu - Asian criminal mastermind, *Mysterious Dr. Satan (aka Doctor Satan's Robot)*, *The Adventures of Captain Marvel* and *Gordon of Ghost City*. The thrill packed serial, *The Perils of Pauline*, was running at the Athenaeum and featured Pearl White (*Pirate Treasures*, *Jungle Girl*) with Frances Gifford, *The Perils of Nyoka* with Kay Aldridge, *The Crimson Ghost*, *The Lone Rider* with Buck Jones and his horse Silver.

Following the introduction of sound, Earl Connolly became a regular visitor to the house and loved the serials. Jack Ryan recalled that it was quite common



for everyone to shout at the screen in those days. There was nothing unusual about getting a belt of an apple either, no doubt thrown by the blackguards of the day. Jack remembers the trailer for the film, *The Invisible Man* "You cannot see him; you cannot hear him, watch out! he's behind you, and you don't know it".

Jack recalled that the Tivoli was a 'rough and tumble' place, with little emphasis on hygiene in those days. He recalled:

The only people who sat in the back two rows were those who had lost their sense of smell, or lovers lost in each other's arms, because when the lavatory door was opened, the pungent stench of urine wafted up the nostrils, very often bringing tears to the eyes. One would need to have the constitution of a horse to sit back there. Jeyes Fluid was used regularly. The lavatory in the Tivoli was far removed from what Thomas Crapper, the inventor of the modern flushing system had in mind. It was more akin to the French open latrine.

The Tivoli was often dubbed the 'bug house.' In its halcyon days during the war, crowds of soldiers from Sarsfield Barracks and their 'moths' thronged the cinema. With so many bodies pressed close together in the wooden benches, fleas, luxuriating in the heat, would often take leave of their current address and go exploring in unmapped territory. A popular story of the time was about a resident flea in the cinema, on observing the haggard condition of his pal, asked what happened, and was told "you'd look the same if you had to hop it all the way down from Sarsfield Barracks" Tom McDonnell remembers that the place was infested with every type of creepy crawly, and it was said that "if you went into the Tivoli as a cripple, then you would come out walking".

Joe Malone remembers that breakdowns were quite frequent. Mary Bernard, who was a member of the staff, could

be seen running along the mall to Mick Ringrose's pub to fetch the head operator who often slipped out for a pint, and if the sing song in the pub was good the changing of the reel would have to wait. It was no strange sight to see a full set of a horse's harness piled up on one of the back seats of the Tivoli. There were a number of stables which stood behind the Tivoli, and sometimes you might find a feed bag full of oats. These minor flaws in decor in the Tivoli didn't mar the enjoyment of the loyal patrons. Staff at the Tivoli did not wear uniforms, just their own casual clothes, which took from the prestige of some of the uptown up-market houses.



Denis O'Shaughnessy recalled that the proprietor, Paul Bernard, was a great friend of John McCormack and would entertain the famous tenor when he came to sing in Limerick. One night when *Song of My Heart*, was showing in the Tivoli, John McCormack, took his place with the other patrons in the balcony, with Paul Bernard to view it. It would have been interesting to hear his comments on the same patrons and the picture house itself.

It was quite normal in those days for youngsters to come out of the cinema, after a matinee, having spent a few pleasant hours watching their idols, especially in the 'cowboy' pictures. Then they started copying the antics, and quoting the cowboy heroes they had just seen. 'Slap leather!' 'Make your play!' 'I got the drop on you!' would be some of the sayings they used.

Jim McDermott recalled some fond memories of the Tivoli. There were two shows per night, at 7 p.m. and 9 p.m., with a matinee on Saturday. Jim said that it provided great comfort for local people, and the area was heavily populated at that time. It was 2d for the stalls and 4d for the balcony, for the earlier show, and 7d for the later show. Jim remembers a Miss Reynolds who used to check the tickets in the balcony. The balcony had beautiful drapes, but you dared not touch them because they were full of years of accumulated dust, as they had never been cleaned or changed. The only carpet to be found in the place was also in the balcony. The projection room was in the stalls and the seats down there were all hard timber benches. Jim said "No one ever queued for the Tivoli; it was every man for himself to get the best seats that you could find".

Jim remembers that, while waiting for it to open, with the swell of the crowd you could be shuffled around the place without ever touching the ground, and on another occasion even being moved across the road to the wall beside the Abbey river. It was not unusual to discover when you eventually got to the box office that your tuppence admission price was missing out of your back pocket, and for that matter, sometimes the pocket as well.

The level of smoking in the cinema in those days was unbelievable. One evening Jim went to see *The Face at the Window* at the later show, and as he approached Baal's Bridge, the exit doors opened for the crowd leaving from the early show. The huge plume of smoke came out and almost completely obscured the entire area around Charlotte's Quay. There was no order in a queue of any kind in those days, when the cinema doors opened the crowd would charge out in all directions, as if they were being evacuated in an emergency.

One evening, a lady fainted during a show. The picture was stopped, the house lights came on and someone called out for a doctor in the house. It was suggested to bring the lady outside to get some fresh air. There was so much smoke in the place that there was nothing to be seen but a thick cloud of smoke everywhere.

Although pictures and dances were banned during Holy Week, on one occasion Richmond Rugby Club organised a concert, with the permission of the Bishop. It had all local talent, and had the use of what was left of the old stage. Billy Good was the master of ceremonies, and was great to motivate the crowd. At the time the women used to wear shawls with strings, and it was not unusual for someone to tie the strings of some unsuspecting lady to the wooden forums, so when they got up to go her shawl would come off.

Denis O'Shaughnessy recalled that on one particular freezing night, the heating broke down. The patrons flayed their arms and stamped their feet on the wooden floor to keep the circulation going and shoved in to one another to try and generate some semblance of heat. The main feature was being shown when a scene came on depicting the rotund lord of a luxurious manor, and his lady, sipping brandy in front of a roaring fire. Joss Browne, from St. Peter Street, shouted up at the screen: "Isn't that a feckin' terror, there they are warming their arses at the fire and the balls frozen off us down here". In that non-central heating era people kept out the cold by throwing coats over beds to supplement threadbare blankets, Joss met a neighbour the morning after a bitterly cold night. "Did you ever come across a colder night?" the neighbour asked Joss. "Did you say cold?" said Joss. "We even put the picture of the Sacred Heart on top of the coats to try and keep warm".

The big picture on show one night starred Johnny Mack Brown, who had the obligatory fight with the villain towards the end. As the crowd came out, one lad, imitating Johnny, after his not unexpected successful showdown, dusted himself down, put on his imaginary hat, hitched up his trousers and vaulted on the low river wall opposite the cinema, pretending it was his horse. Unfortunately, he overdid his vault and with a despairing cry wound up in the swift running waters of the Abbey River. He was rescued from beneath Matthew Bridge a short time later. He lived to tell the tale, but was in future more careful of what he used as horse prop.

Dick Cross came from the Dublin Road and recalled that his father used to give him a shilling to get his hair cut in Dan Galvin's barber shop. He used to go to 'Bishop' Dunphy instead and get it cut for sixpence, and then would go to the Tivoli for four pence to see *Dick Treacy* and had tuppence for sweets. His father always knew that Dan Galvin didn't cut Dick's hair, as there was little taken off in the cut. One of the last films to be shown at the old Tivoli was the 1958 film *A Night to Remember* which starred Kenneth More and was based on Walter Lord's book about the sinking of the Titanic, and considered to be the best film version of the tragedy. Patrons used to come out of the Tivoli after a show and cry their eyes out while sitting on the wall of the Abbey River. In its final years, the Tivoli was run by the

Coffey family, who were also involved in the travelling cinema business. The Tivoli closed its doors for the last time in 1959 and lay idle and in a derelict state for several years afterwards. Abbey River House now stands on the site on Charlotte's Quay.

TIVOLI CINEMA

Monday and Tuesday, January 25th and 26th, at 3.45, 6.45 and 9 p.m.

KANE RICHMOND in
DOUBLE CROSS

When it comes to real actionful screen entertainment, nobody can dish it out like the motor cycle police and dish it out they do in *Double Cross*.

Kay Francis in
PLAYGIRL

Beautiful Kay Francis at her best in the role you will love her in.

Wednesday and Thursday, January 27th and 28th at 3.45, 6.45 and 9 p.m.

JEAN HERSHOLT as DR. CHRISTIAN in
THEY MEET AGAIN

Containing all the elements of drama, mystery, melody, love and laughter, to make this the most outstanding offering of the Dr. Christian Series. Supported by

WHERE THE BUFFALO ROAMS

Thrills galore with spine chilling action.

Friday & Saturday, January 29th & 30th, at 3.45, 6.45 and 9 p.m.

CAROLE LOMBARD and ROBERT MONTGOMERY in
MR. & MRS. SMITH

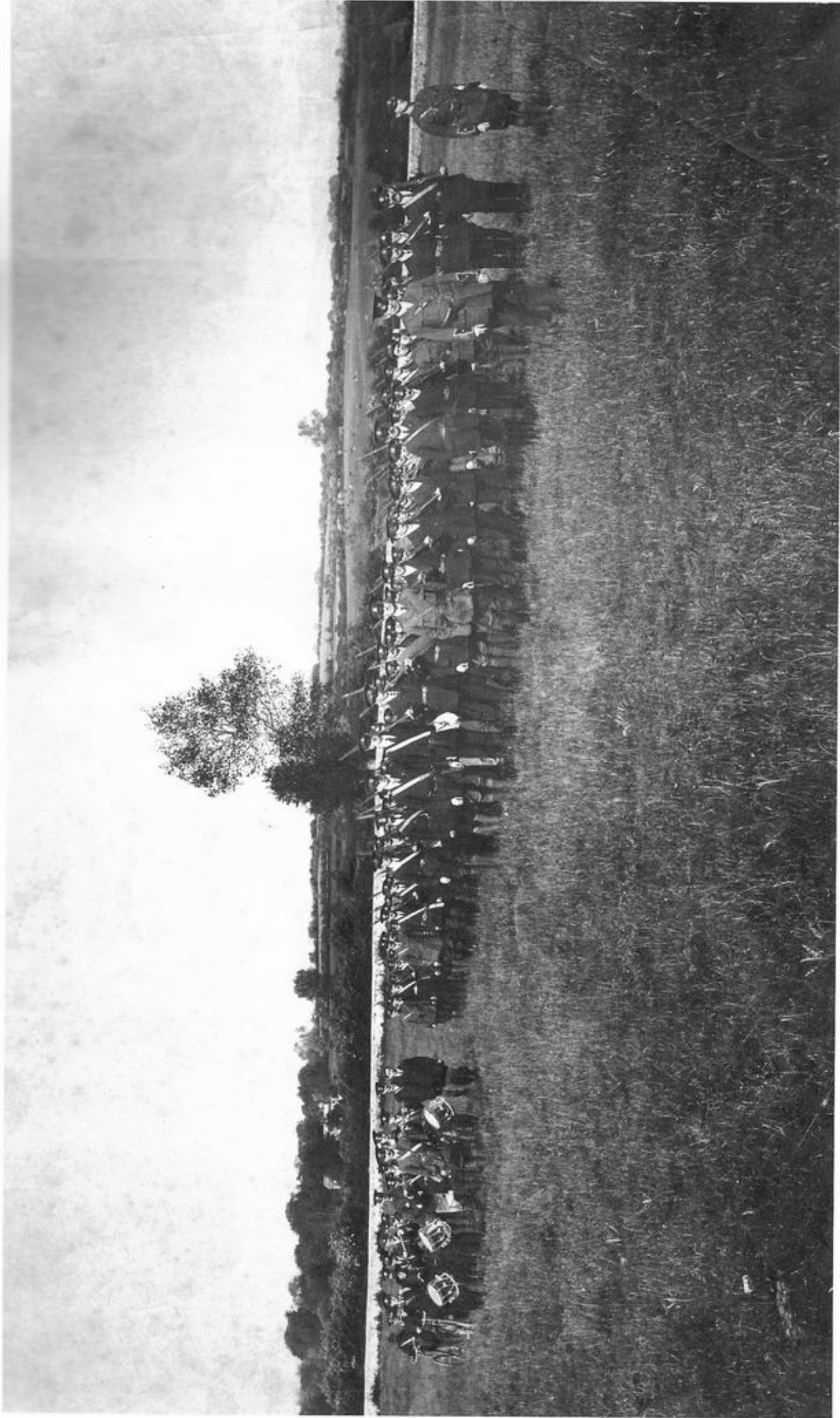
Plenty comedy, laughs and romance. Grand story and good cast.

FULL SUPPORTING PROGRAMME.

NEXT WEEK--Bette Davis in "THE LETTER" and Mickey Rooney in "BOYS TOWN"

ADMISSION : 2d., 3d., 4d, 7d. & 9d.

Poster for Tivoli Cinema advertising film attractions from the 1940s.



On Good Friday 1916, members of the Volunteers, Na Fianna and a band marched from Pery Square to Laffan's field in Killonan and most marched home again on Easter Sunday morning.

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