

The glory days of the old Savoy recalled

The graceful Marriott Hotel steps into its place

By John O'Shaughnessy

ONE detected more than a few tears in the eyes of veterans Tom English, John Likely and Maurice Johnston, as they assembled on the 'stage' of what had been their schooling ground in the world of business management, last weekend.

The occasion was the official opening of the magnificent new Marriott Hotel, applauded by the people of Limerick for its splendour, as was, no doubt, the Savoy Cinema/Theatre/Restaurant, on its grand opening in 1935.

The trio, you see, had all been past captain's of the ship at the legendary Bedford Row complex, when it was owned by the Odeon Group, and were coming together for the first time since the company took the decision to close the doors in the mid-1970s, amidst a storm of protest.

It was afterwards purchased by a number of local businessmen, including the late Pakie Hayes and Tony O'Mara, with Johnston invited to return as manager.

It continued for a few years as a theatre, reopening with the Maureen Potter show. After they severed their connection, the building passed on to a Dublin based concern and was transformed into a six cinema multiplex, bar and restaurant, with apartments overhead.

Last Friday night was also a very special occasion for wheelchair bound 82-year-old Bridget Sheehan, from Janesboro', who served in various capacities at the old Savoy. Bridget is now resident at a nursing home.

Castleconnell-based John Likely, nowadays manager of The Stranville Lodge Hotel, Wexford, recalled the evening that he travelled by car from Dublin with this writer, after he had been summoned to a meeting by the directors of Odeon (who owned the Savoy chain).



The mayor of Limerick Ger Fahy with Bridget Sheehan.

"I was told at that meeting that they were closing the Savoy-naturally enough, I was upset, especially having to convey the bad news to staff, and we were about half way to Limerick when I built up the courage to let you into the secret, knowing you would have it all over the paper the next day".

Tom English was manager of the Savoy in its prime. That was when advance booking was required for Sunday evening performances, always guaranteed to fill. Capacity was 1,500, the biggest auditorium in the land.

"There was little else to do on a Sunday in the Limerick of that period, when money was scarce enough. No matter what film was shown, the place was always full".

Tom, father of Alan English, editor, Limerick Leader, and rugby writer Tom English, has a host of memories from the Savoy's golden era, when he personally greeted internationally known stars of stage, screen and radio, and looked after their every whim.

"We had some great theatrical events and were out there competing with Jack Bourke of the City Theatre".

Former mayor Bourke, who was in our company,



Former managers of the Savoy; John Likely, Maurice Johnston, Tom English with former proprietor of the City Theatre Jack Bourke.

was having none of it, claiming that all the major acts went to the Sexton Street venue.

Rugby-mad Johnston intervened: "Stop it lads, we are showing our age-the vast majority of the guests here this evening neither knew the old Savoy or City Theatre. The world has moved on".

The management team at the Marriott Hotel brought out the red carpet, celebrity style, as they proudly unveiled their multi million euro investment.

General manager Brian Harrington, seen in the company of his dad Jackie Harrington, famous

golfer of the 50s and 60s, had a handshake for each of the 300-odd guests, prepared to answer all questions relating to what is a Limerick treasure.

"We want to take you on a journey from the opening of the Savoy in 1935 to the opening of the hotel", said Brian, who also looks after the interests of sister hotel, The Castletroy Park.

The champagne reception was followed by a visit to the Liszt Lounge for the official opening and live jazz, and from there to the Savoy Bar for cocktails, and the Savoy restaurant for a delicious selection of canapes.

"The old Savoy might be gone but as is to be seen, we have christened our bar and lounge to keep the name alive," concluded Brian.

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