

Happy 21st birthday memories



Former Savoy manager, Tom English, speaks to **John Hogan** about the heyday of the city's Savoy and recalls the cinema and theatre's 21st birthday party in 1956

"EVERYBODY who was anybody came to the Savoy," recalls Tom English, former manager of the Bedford Row cinema and theatre.

One of the most memorable nights for Mr English from his many years in the Savoy was the 21st birthday celebration that was held in 1956:

"Everything was done so well for the birthday. We had put up posters from all the live shows and films we'd had over the years around the foyer. All of our suppliers had taken out ads in the papers wishing the theatre a happy birthday, they took up three full pages of the Limerick Leader that week."

The Savoy also received the good wishes of a number of the big movie studios in America such as MGM and Paramount, reflecting the high esteem in which the theatre was held internationally as well as locally.

Rock Hudson, Lana Turner and a number of the other top Hollywood stars of the day also sent their birthday wishes to Limerick via telegraph.

Looking at the pictures of

the celebrations from over 50 years ago, Tom English reflects happily on how many of the staff from opening night had also attended the 21st Birthday. The theatre had 45 full-time employees, including 12 cleaners, five cloakroom attendants, a full-time electrician and a stage door keeper whose job it was to fend off 'autograph hunters' or 'stage door Johnnys' as they were also known back then.

Once the 1500 invitation-only guests had packed into the Savoy to celebrate 21 years in Limerick, Johnny McMahon and his orchestra opened the show from the enormous orchestra pit in front of the stage.

"They started by playing 'Happy Birthday'," says Mr English, "then I came on and introduced the Mayor, John Carew. He spoke to the audience about the importance of the Savoy to Limerick and received a cheque for local charities from Edmond A. Grace, the secretary of Irish cinemas. After that Johnny and the orchestra played a medley and then we showed a movie."



Edmond A. Grace, Secretary of Irish Cinemas presents a cheque for charity to Mayor of Limerick, John Carew. Watching are Tom English, Manager of the Savoy Theatre and Cinema, and Michael J. Keyes, Minister for Post and Telegraphs.

Although the name of the film that was shown on the night has since escaped his memory, he does remember that the evening went down as one of the best celebrations Limerick had ever seen. "After the film, we went upstairs and a special presentation of a commemorative clock was made to staff members who had been working there since the theatre opened. Then the band started playing and there was dancing 'til the small hours of the night."

"In the history of the Savoy, that night stood out," says Tom English. "It was the place to be at the time. Our

stage was bigger than the Savoy in Dublin, all the films were played with stereo sound and we'd had a huge cinemascope screen installed in 1953."

Unlike today's cinematic experience, which often leaves the viewer picking a variety of popcorn, chewing gum and penny sweets from their clothes, staff in the Savoy ensured the theatre was maintained to an impeccable standard. "The place was immaculate," says Mr English. "Back then people were allowed smoke in the cinema and even the brass ashtrays were polished every evening."

There is no comparable building in Limerick today that could hold a candle to the once renowned venue in its prime. The Savoy theatre could hold an audience of just over 1,500 at capacity and at one point was bringing in up to 16,000 people a week.

"We had three screenings a day and it would have been full every night," recalls Tom. While the Savoy was primarily known as a cinema in its final years, it also had a reputation as a live venue of high standing during Tom English's tenure as manager. He recalls many "legends" gracing the stage in front of a full house, among them were

Yehudi Menuhin, "the greatest violin player of all time", A. Gordon Spicer, "a fantastic organist and a great character" and Jack Cruise, who Mr English says was always "a guaranteed full house."

He also remembers that Limerick audiences were notoriously hard to please with many acts and movies that had proven successful elsewhere receiving the coldest of receptions in the Savoy: "If they liked something they supported it but some great live shows died in Limerick, we were a hard town to impress. I suppose we just had very high standards."



Cutting the birthday cake at the 21st birthday of the Savoy. (From left) Mayor John Carew, Lady Mayoress Hilda Carew (cutting the cake), Johnny McMahon, Donogh O'Malley, P.J. Meegan (County Manager), Oona McQuirter, Michael Keyes, Colman Conroy, Nelly Donnelly, Des Maher, May Birmingham, Tom English, Rita Moran, Edmond Grace. (Man sitting down unidentified)

of the Savoy cinema and theatre



Some of the staff and dignitaries that attended the 21st birthday of the Savoy. (Back row from left) Tom English (Manager of Savoy cinema and theatre), Canon James Cowper, Michael Ryan, Benny Franklin, Edmond Grace (Secretary of Irish Cinemas), Jimmy Carter, Claire O'Ryan, Johnny McMahon, Dick Murphy, Colman Conroy, Donogh O'Malley (would go on to be Minister for Education), Alec O'Farrell. (Front Row from left) Oona McQuirter, Nelly Donnelly, unidentified waitress, unidentified waitress, Mayor John Carew, May Birmingham, Michael Keyes (Minister for Post and Telegraphs), Rita Moran (Manager of Savoy Restaurant), Hugh Margey.



Some of the audience who attended the 21st birthday party of the Savoy in the foyer of the theatre. Note the posters from old shows on the walls. Savoy pictures from the Sean Curtin Collection