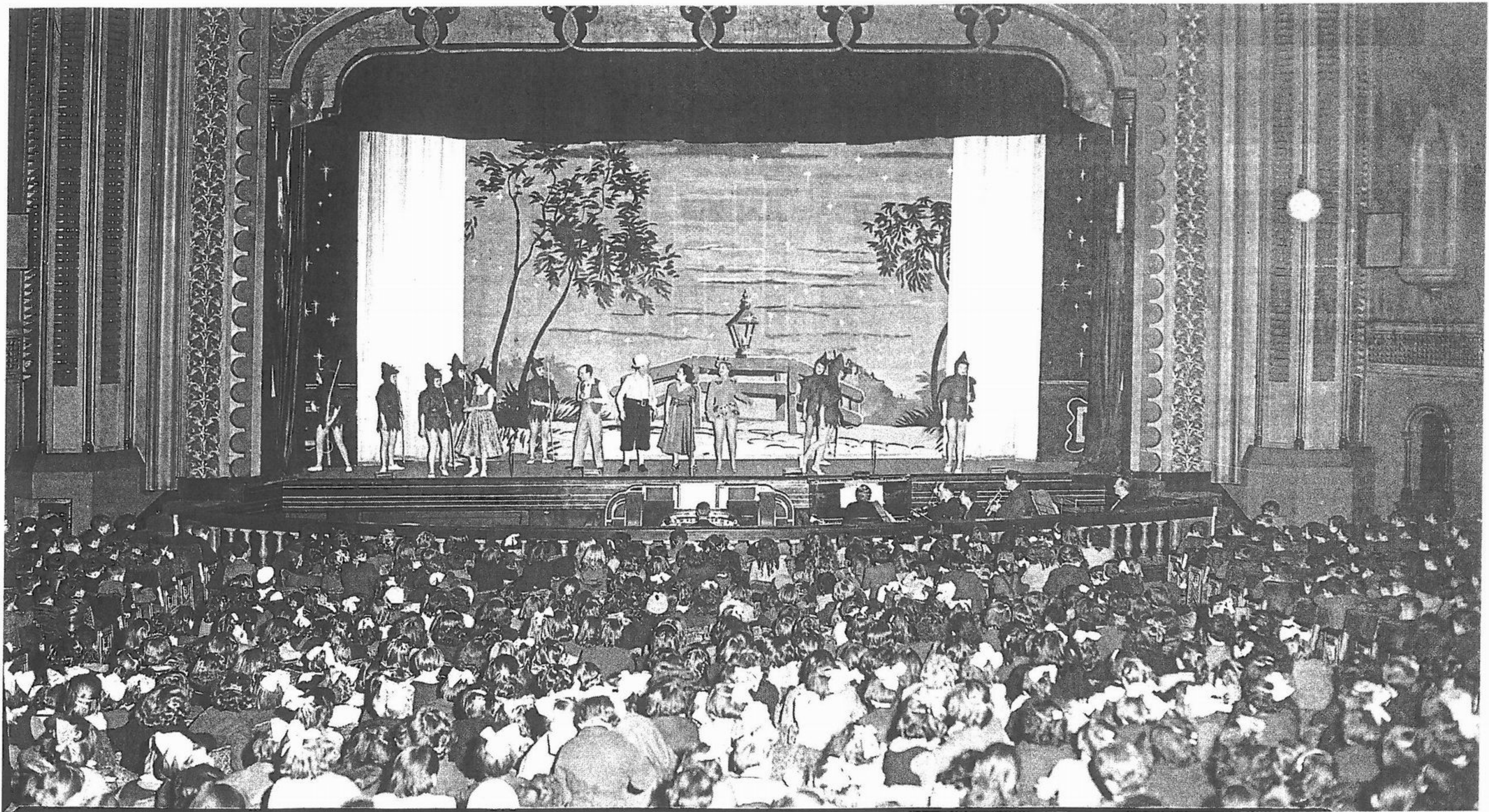


## BABES IN THE WOOD PANTO AT THE SAVOY, 1957

## ARCHIVE SPECIAL

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Jack Cruise's free performance of Christmas pantomime, *Babes in the Wood*, at Savoy Theatre from January 1957. Former manager Tom English reckons it was the biggest audience ever at the Savoy: 'If the fire officer had turned up, we'd have been in trouble!'

# Panto heaven for 1,700 kids

The Leader had a great response to our 1957 panto pictures last week. **Grainne Keays** writes on what makes them so timeless and manager of the day



# timeless and manager of the day Tom English looks back fondly

IF laughter is the best medicine, then during Christmas 1956, with Jack Cruise and his company of players in town, the doctors and apothecaries of Limerick must surely have feared for their businesses. Younger readers may not remember Cruise as a gifted actor and comedian, who was a favourite of the Dublin theatre scene for many years. This was his company's first appearance in Limerick when they put on their production of *Babes in the Wood* at the Savoy Cinema. It ran until Saturday, January 12, 1957.

The recently rediscovered photos we bring you today are from a very special performance of the panto which was held on January 8, 1957, when 1,700 children from Limerick were treated to a free matinee performance at the Savoy, as guests of the Mayor of Limerick at the time, G.E. (Ted) Russell.

Bear in mind that these were the days when children only had one or two toys each: a doll and skipping rope for girls and, perhaps, a ball and a handful of toy soldiers for boys. Treats were few and far between and gave rise to great excitement. As our pictures show, the children lucky enough to attend were delighted with their big day.

One of the many readers who enjoyed the pictures we published last week was Tom English, who was the youthful manager of the Savoy 60 years ago. Tom, now 84, vividly recalls how it all came together.

"The day before the show I had a call from Ted Russell, who was a friend of mine. He asked how much it would cost to put on a special matinee performance for the children of Limerick.

"The owners of the theatre agreed to make it available for £100 — half the usual rate. Jack Cruise and all of the performers gave their services for free, as did every member of the Savoy staff. They were delighted to do their bit to give the kids a great day out. We had around 1,700 in the house that day — and the capacity was just under 1,500. If the fire officer had turned up, we'd have been in trouble!"

In addition to the fabulous performance, each

child received a bag of sweets, also a rare treat. According to a Limerick Leader report, "sweet merchants in Limerick and Dublin provided confectionary; and with the help of private subscriptions, 1,750 bags of sweets were made available for distribution."

There was even free ice cream! Tom recalls: "Can you imagine how the place looked after all of that? It was in a right state, but the cleaners came in straight after the show and had it spotless again for the evening performance."

The matinee was a tremendous success and Jack Cruise went on to delight audiences for another 22 years before he passed away suddenly at his home in Dublin in 1979.

The Leader article reported that three unfortunate members of the cast met with an accident later that night, having left after the evening performance. Nora Dixon and two child performers, Maureen Byrne and Dolores Sheridan, were knocked down by a Volkswagen car as they attempted to cross the street at the junction of Bedford Row and O'Connell Street and had to be taken by ambulance to Barringtons' Hospital. They were described as "comfortable" the following morning.

The show must go on, however, and Jack Cruise was commended in the paper for fulfilling an appointment at the Regional Hospital with members of his company the following day, putting on a special performance for the patients there.

"That was typical of Jack," remembered Tom fondly.



Some of the enormous crowd at the free matinee show back in 1957. These wonderful pictures were taken by the Leader's very first staff photographer, the late Donal MacMonagle



Young and old on stage for the popular panto



Another fine Donal MacMonagle shot from the performance at the Savoy



Limerick's got talent: Some of the younger performers in *Babes in the Wood*