

Smaller theatres, the "Garryowen" in Broad Street and the "Gaiety" in O'Connell Street, put on small shows and concerts for a short time. The former bearded the lion in his den by opening only a hundred yards from the Tivoli in its balmy days, and suffered for its folly, closing after a year or two.

THE THEATRE ROYAL

(by Kevin Hannan)

This theatre was built in Henry Street in 1841 by Joseph Fogarty and continued to delight enraptured audiences for sixty years. It was a noble building and was second only to Dublin's Theatre Royal for grandeur and size. Pictures of famous performers who played in the theatre festooned the walls, including the great Catherine Hayes, who, despite her dazzling international success and the great demands on her talents, found time to return on no less than three occasions to her native city to enthral her fellow citizens in the Theatre Royal. What a great pity that Limerick's other International celebrity - the greatest Shakespearian actress of them all - Ada Rehan, never set foot again after leaving it in 1860. What a welcome she would have got in the Royal!

The late Mr. J.F. Walsh, historian and theatre goer, left us a fine description of the old place:

"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 colum. Seated on steps, one 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 end of a performance, and time and again great actors and actresses had to come on in front of this to make their final bows."

Limerick audiences always seemed to prefer musical performances, and the shows of D'oyley Carte, Joseph O'Mara,

Moody Manners, Elester-Grime and Carl Rosa always packed the theatre for every performance. Musical comedies were enjoyed with the same zest. There was an evergreen welcome for the George Edwards Girl shows: "The Girl in the train," "My Girl," "The Quaker Girl" and "The Country Girl." Then there were the other great musicals: "San Toy," "The Geisha," "Floradora," "The Belle of New York," "The Merry Widow," "Maid of the Mountains," "The Chocolate Soldier" and many others.

Among the many dramas enjoyed here were "Pink Dominoes," "The last of Mrs. Cheney," "Trilby," "Sign of the Cross," "A royal Divorce," "Under the Robe" and a host of others, including all the Shakespearian dramas.

One of the greatest attractions of the Royal in its later years was "Mouser" Fitzgerald, a brilliant local baritone who, during the intervals, stole the thunder of the best performers in the operas with his splendid rendering of pieces from the operas. He usually sang from the "Gods" of which he was a well known and well loved patron. The whole audience of the packed theatre were usually held spellbound by his wonderful voice, and it was nothing unusual for his many encores to delay the next act. He refused many invitations to join companies who were mystified that such an outstanding artist should allow his talent to stagnate in a bacon factory where he worked as a pork butcher.

Of the professionals who performed at the Royal, the great baritone, Frank Land, was surely one of the greatest. When he was on the bill every seat was sure to be occupied. With all his great talent he had a serious weakness for the bottle. His company usually stayed at the Imperial Hotel in Catherine Street. On one occasion before opening night his company took his clothes at the hotel and hid them in an effort to keep him out of the pubs so that he would be in his best voice for the first night. Frank, however wrapped himself in a blanket and stole over to O'Dwyer's public house at the corner of Roche's Street and Catherine Street. The worth of his performance that night is not recorded. He died in the city and was buried in St. Munchin's.

As if the threat of the cinema in the early years of the present century was not enough worry for Limerick theatre goers their beloved Theatre Royal was burned to the ground on the 23rd. of January 1922.

THE CITY THEATRE

Live theatre in Limerick remained in the doldrums until 1952 when an enterprising Dublin man, Jack Bourke, purchased the Ritz cinema in Sexton Street and promoted cinema cum theatre for many years. Mr. Bourke was a member of a well known Dublin theatrical family and used his expertise in a manner that

Limerick Film Archive
Ph. 061-341 435