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Arts

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LIVING HISTORY

If Walls Could Talk... a story of Limerick theatre

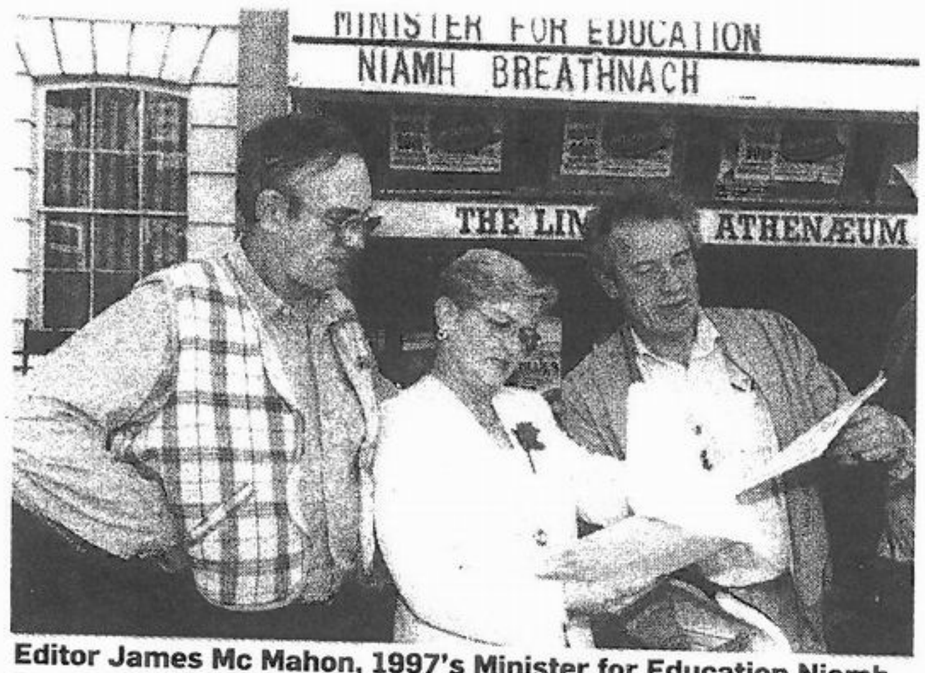
'If Walls Could Talk!, The Story of an Irish Theatre est. 1852' is the title of a seminal work on the history of Limerick's entertainment world – which has embraced celebrity at every echelon over two centuries. From Houdini the escape artist to soprano Catherine Hayes, from Billy Connolly to The Cranberries, we reference The Limerick Athenaeum, known today as Theatre Royal on Cecil Street.

In more recent times it became a venue for international bands, raves and comedians in the 1990s but those Athenaeum walls were privy to the best in showbiz, be it The Prodigy or 1860's The Garrison Glee Club.

Why talk about Th' Ata now, you may wonder? Because the researcher and compiler of this hefty tome, 'If Walls Could Talk!', Mr James McMahon, died peacefully at home this month.

James (69) was a scion of the mighty McMahon timber family, who were the biggest merchant family in Limerick," observes Seamus Flynn, latter-day owner of Theatre Royal. It was Seamus who commissioned James – historian, *photographer and artist (stain glass)* to source evidences to the legend.

The business man had taken over his defunct building from Ward-Anderson multiplex on the undertaking he would never screen cinema there. And so its renaissance as a theatre house began. Seamie got



Editor James Mc Mahon, 1997's Minister for Education Niamh Breathnach and Athenaeum owner, Seamus Flynn

The Corrs to play there, Del Amitri, Mick Hanly, Jonathan Lloyd Webber, names as big as their 19th and 20th century predecessors. Count John McCormack got billed as a support act in 1905, and Percy French entertained the masses.

"I met with James in 1992/93," Seamus Flynn recalls. "I told him of the project, a newly restored concert hall/ theatre in the heart of Georgian Limerick ...which I believed had colourful history that included a performance by the great Houdini. James came on board to research and guide the project".

"The result was 'If Walls could Talk', the history of the Limerick Athaneum from 1852 and each week of its 150yr life was researched".

"Brendan O'Carroll was one of the first stars to come and he credited Limerick on his video shot here from the Theatre Royal, 'How's Your Snowballs'.

"He is one of the performers who helped fund the writing project, they all contributed.

"You see, we ran the Theatre Royal at very, very low cost. Everything was paid from box office, there was no funding. Boyzone played at least twice before they ever played in Dublin, with Louis Walsh driving them around and an episode of Fr Ted was made there".

Other artists who contributed were The Cranberries and The Hitchers. Everyone was tapped for a few quid and they gave graciously.

Seamie continues: "In 1996 'If Walls Could Talk' was one of the first books launched by the Minister for Education on the Internet. Limerick was suffering from poor national image at that time and this...could be used to positively promote the city and the venue.

"The result is regarded by serious historians and President of the Georgian Society, the Knight of Glin, as an important first-generation contribution to the history of Limerick."

Leafing through 100+ illustrated pages is a juicy read. There is a serious appendix of sources, from 'The Viceroys of Ireland' to newspapers such Limerick Post to the archives of 'The Dublin Builder'.

James' work was also responsible for the Athenaeum Museum and portrait gallery. The first portrait was that of Catherine Hayes by Sir Frederick Burton; the first item was the Thomas Edison sound machine.

Book production credits to Guy Monteilh, and Limerick Post's Kieran White and Damien Clifford.

For James McMahon (1946 – 2015), RIP

Live crib at Adare

■ NEXT Sunday December 20 will see Adare village host its 'live crib' concept for the 19th year. All are welcome to come and be adoring throughout the afternoon as the parish opens arms and alms in the true spirit of the season. It's located in the stable yard of Fr Moriarty's house, the entrance being to the side of Dunraven Arms Hotel. There will be a festive atmosphere and Arts page has word of "mulled wine and refreshments generously provided by local hostelries".

Admission is free but donations are welcome, sent on to projects through Africa as well as The Philippines, Haiti and Chernobyl Orphanage. "The popularity of the event never wanes," comments villager, Anne Mordan. "It captures the very essence of Christmas with live babies, live Holy Families, live animals, live shepherds and plenty of live carol-singers all adding to the atmosphere and authenticity of the event". From grand-parents to babes in arms, everybody is welcome to this delightful embrace of the birth of Our Lord, Jesus Christ that has a focus on need throughout the world.

POSTings....

* 51 O'Connell St, CB: Rev. New show of paintings by Master Jean Ryan Hakizimana, writer and teacher. Until Dec. 31.

* HUNT Museum: Thursday 17 at 7pm, silent auction of LSAD collective works. Proceeds to Mid-West Simon Community; mulled wine.

Noreen Walshe's 'Spirit of Childhood in Limerick – Christmas' until Dec. 22. 'Chroma' will be an exhibition of works by Kate Hennessy inspired by John Hunt's medieval sculpture and his travel books. Launched by Dr Andy McCarthy on January 7 at 6pm. Until Jan 28.

* LIMERICK Printmakers, 69 O'Connell St: 'Innumerable Subtle Creations' is a show of new works by Dawn West, thePrintmakers' Bursary winner of 2014/15. Until Dec 21.

* LCGA, Pery Sq: Major group installation in artist-run spaces; also 'Visions of Now' works.

PANTOMIME

Twin tales of Goldie's blonde ambition

Mrs Headlocks (Tim Cusack) and Goldilocks (Emma) embrace business opportunity by taking on these fabulous furry bears

A DOZEN years with Limerick Panto Society, RTE's Emma O'Driscoll is all a-glow she heads into a working Christmas with enormous cast of 'Goldilocks – The Circus Panto'. Everything is novel in John Ryan's script, presenting the blonde heroine and her mum Mrs Headlocks (Tim Cusack as perennial Dame) as entrepreneurs running a circus, to mixed fortune.

"The circus is going downhill," Emma 'fesses up. "They have to find a circus act to turn things around and they hear about the three bears in the wood. This pantomime is not a love story... they go after the bears for their show".

And meet foul and funny play, as music and choreography synchronise wittily to send in the clowns. Look forward to musical numbers from 'Barnum' and pop songs; Emma's golden pipes will say 'hello' to at least one superstar scaling the charts.

"The level of work that goes into [our productions] is something that astounds me, and Tony Cusack as director is just brilliant. He has a fantastic eye for character".

From Upper Carey's Road originally, Emma travels the Dublin-Limerick axis for various projects. She has set up her own stage school Gemstars with her sister Georgina, operating out of Caherconlish Millennium Centre, Crecora NS and in January, Delta Retail Park.

While Emma found young fame in pop group Six, Georgina pursued childcare. Her "best bud" sister is duly proud of Georgina's Special Merit in a BA in Applied Social Sciences in Social Care, winning the Brothers of Charity Limerick award for Overall Excellence.

Exciting too is this prospect of Goldilocks reinvented as a resourceful woman up against Madame de Farquotte (Laura Hunt), Bertie Bagem (Damian Shaw) and Seanie Shootem (James Corr).

Book for **December 27 to January 3 on www.limetreetheatre.ie** for laughs at matinée and evening panto; no show on December 31.

COMMUNITY

The sum of €4,000 was raised through the sale of and donation of visual art works by Limerick based artists. These featured in the windows and premises of Roches Street for the Traders annual arts festival in September. From left, Louise Sadlier, Roy Finucane and John Sadlier flank the equal charity beneficiaries, Verena Tarpey of Rape Crisis Midwest, centre left, and CARI's Helen Coote and Mary Madden