

Memories of the Limerick Theatre ... And an Actor's Last Exit

J.P. O'Sullivan

By Kevin Dinneen

Joe O'Sullivan died June 1981. He was a great man of the Limerick theatre. His performances in the 'twenties, 'thirties, 'forties and 'fifties are still talked about by old theatre lovers. He, together with Alma Fitt, Mick Carrick and Jack Savage, founded the Limerick Drama League, boldly taking as their theatre crest the City Arms. Alma made available a rehearsal room at the Savings Bank. This was a great beginning, for without consistent rehearsal place with reasonable comfort and fair acoustics a theatre has no chance of development.

The Limerick Drama League was one of the first drama groups to be formed, outside Dublin and Belfast, which was unattached to school, college or social club. Joe took as his object the presentation of plays and the establishment of an independent theatre in Limerick - an ambitious scheme for the mid-'twenties in a country endeavouring to recover from the disastrous effects of the Civil War. His achievement is almost impossible to understand today in an age of undreamed affluence, when a theatre can be assured of some state and municipal support.

Joe O'Sullivan got his company about him in 1925 and produced T.C. Murray's **Autumn Fire** at the old "Coll". This was its first presentation outside the Abbey Theatre. Joe's "Owen Keegan" to Eileen Fitzmaurice's "Nance" and Nellie Dundon's "Ellen" was theatre at its best. Limerick gasped in amazement at the high standard and packed the theatre.

Joe walked on air for some weeks. This was his life, the very kernel of his being! He was easily tempted from an organised programme by the opportunity to play a big, leading part. He had no patience with the old theatre adage, "First you build your following ... then try for your own stage".

Next we find him in George Shiel's **Professor Tim** giving a never to be forgotten portrayal of the quirky professor, with Joyce Lane and Sean O'Kelly, again displaying his audience appeal. His production ran for almost a month. His character study was so intense it was the talking point in the city - to use one of our old phrases - 'for many a long day'. He played several of George Shiel's more successful plays. People loved him. 'Joe O'Sullivan is in it', and their faces lit up in happy anticipation of an enjoyable evening's theatre.

In the 1930s Joe had another dream. The Limerick Drama League was too confined and so it became the Limerick Drama and Music League. Competent musicians they were too, who had been recruited to support the stage play with their music. The officer board was composed of public figures together with a most impressive patrons' list. Oh they were heady times!

The season 1932-33 was possibly his most consistent season. He produced four plays. His production of Urban Nagle's **Barter**, a passion play, at the Athenaeum, was very well worth while. The music of Handel, Mendelssohn, Tchaikowsky, under the baton of Granville Metcalfe, gave a stately maturity to the presentation. Joe had a splendid opportunity in the part of "Verus" to display his voice range. The well balanced and impressive lines of the distinguished Dominican playwright were

used by him to reach the highest level. Kitty Bredin played "Magdala", and Ita Fitzgibbon was also another youthful member of the company.

After this production there was another pause, to be followed by the closing stage of the Drama League in its final two years. The play which brought the curtain down was *Still Running* by J.J. MacKeown. Joe had no part in it.

The first time, strange as it may seem, Joe was seen in a classic was in O'Casey's **Juno and the Paycock** in which he played "Joxer" to Madge Dineen's "Juno" and Cyril Gallivan's "Captain" at The Playhouse. It was really wonderful to see these three actors play together. A piece of sheer professional competence. Standards were laid for a long time to come, Joe, professional that he was, accepted "Joxer" as a challenge and, ye gods, how he stood up to it! An experienced theatre supporter said the other day: 'Tears still come to my eyes when I recall Joe O'Sullivan's "Joxer".' He had a reputation among actors of being wayward with lines. Not so with "Joxer"; he was word perfect!

In Wally Macken's **Home is the Hero**, also at The Playhouse, Joe and Marie Hyland played a tinker pair. What a pair! - Dovetail and Bid. They had splendid leads from Betty Lawless and Shelia O'Doherty.

What vivid portrayals! It is alleged that one patron, sitting in the third row, said: 'You could smell them!' They came on centre as if shot from a cannon, the off-stage voice-medley, controlled by Gladys Matthews, dinging in their ears. Joe with the ragged backside ... the dovetail, and Bid in her tightly wrapped shawl. He jerked in glee, his eyes flashing excitement, the off-stage din continuing. You could sense his anticipation of creation ... Here was theatre, rare, seldom met with. He had the audience. What could be more glorious? His body stiffened; he skipped but the legs were rigid in a most feline way ... a cat in ecstasy ... a most rare expression of the secretive cat. His arms reached towards the floor, hands outstretched and fingers viced to the very tips. The playful cacophony went on and on. The audience watched ... not a titter ... some with mouths agape ... when would it end? ... the tension! Just then it did, and Joe O'Sullivan had cut a niche in Limerick theatre history.

The curtain goes up on an empty and dark auditorium. A few survivors of our times huddle in the wings and look out upon, to an actor, the most awesome of pictures ... a dressed stage fully lit - and empty! Music ... it is an organ ... the Largo ... Joe's and Alma's favourite lament. Each actor in turn comes on. The Largo swells and gives grandeur to the scene. The actor bows to a memory ... that is all there is ... the ephemeral art, the Cinderella ... memories of our dear ones ... nothing more - but evergreen. The actor bows, goes off. Handel's glorious music fades ... Peace. Peace. Dear St. Genesies, patron of actors, make your prompt loud and clear.

No stroke of paint. No mould of clay. No chisel cut...