

Taidhbhearc na Gaillimhe

On the 1820 map of Galway, the site of the Taidhbhearc was part of the then Augustinian Church. When the present church was built in the 1850's, the site became derelict. The late Ned Joyce remembered a large tree growing on the site, a tree which stretched across the street to a tenement known as 'The Windings'. The occupants used to hang their washing on the tree on fine days.

In 1912, The Augustinians built the present building as a parish hall, which functioned as a social club where they put on dramatic productions as well as playing billiards and table tennis etc. This club became defunct and in 1928, a committee of 10, under the chairmanship of Dr. Seamus O'Beirne took it over and equipped it as a theatre. Their idea, and that of the Government of the time, was to use An Taidhbhearc and An Céad Cath, the Irish speaking army battalion based in Renmore Barracks, as vehicles for the regeneration and promotion of the Irish language in Galway. The committee invited Micheál Mac Liammóir and Hilton Edwards to produce the first play which was Micheál's own 'Diarmuid agus Gráinne'.

The cast in that historic production included Máire Ní Scolaí, Eamonn O Fuaráin, Liam O'Briain, Proinsias Mac Diarmada, Micheál O'Droighneáin, R. Mac Giolla Choinnigh, Pádraic Mac Donncha Peadar O Coincheannain, Donal O Colthún, Seán O Cadhain, Mairtin O'Direáin, Brid Nic Aodha, Brid Ni Gríofa, Máire Nic Coistealbha, Bean Mhic Con Mhídh, Proinsias O'Seanaigh, Máire Ní Bheirn, Brid Ní Ghlionnáin and Ite Ní Lócháin as well as Mac Liammoir.

And so began a remarkable series of productions of plays in Irish, of pantomimes and concerts and ballets, of Feiseanna and poetry readings, of touring productions in Irish and English, schools and university drama festivals, all for the entertainment of Galway audiences. The theatre was the only one in the city for many years. It has undergone many changes since the beginning, for example in 1944, the Connacht Sentinel noted that 'The orchestra pit has really become a pit, having been sunk well below the level of the auditorium, the dressing rooms have been improved, a big scene dock and store room have been built, but the improvement the audience will notice is the installation of an additional stove in the auditorium with the piping so adjusted as to warm the air for a wide radius'. In 1978, the old balcony was removed and new seating arrangements put in. Subsequently a new floor was added over the auditorium. The most recent change happened 2 years ago when vandals maliciously started a fire in the Green Room, and because of this, the theatre has been closed since. The damage was such that it needs to be renovated and brought up to today's standards of health and safety.

It has been the actors who have kept the Taidhbhearc a living thing, and over the years it has produced many fine actors, directors and playwrights; Frank Dermody, Walter Macken, Máirtín O Direáin, Seán McGlory, Siobhán McKenna, Frank Bailey, Cyril Mahony, Seán Duignan, Mick Lally, Mícheál O Conaola are some of the big names, but how can one quantify the contribution made to artistic life in Galway by people like Seán and Máire Stafford, Dick Byrne, Colette Heaney, Maighréad Concannon, Johnny Horan and others too numerous to mention.

Despite all the knockers, this brave little theatre has survived for over 80 years, and in doing so, has given many memorable moments and much pleasure. Now the knockers have been joined by officialdom in the shape of the Department of the Gaeltacht and Galway Corporation. Each of these organisations had promised monies towards the refurbishment of the Taidhbhearc after the fire. Each now says that its contribution is contingent on the other paying up first, and furthermore they now want the Taidhbhearc to move. Their version of the promised land is a few small houses in Merchant's Road. And, they want Conradh na Gaeilge and Gaillimh Le Gaeilge to move in with them. It seems they want to ghettoise the Gaeilgeoirs.

The Taidhbhearc has been a fundamental part of artistic life in this city for 80 years. It has served the city well. If it were to move, it would no longer be An Taidhbhearc, the ethos would be gone and much of the tradition and history. It deserves to be preserved, if only in memory of those mentioned above and all who worked there. It must not be kept as a museum, but as a living working theatre, so it is vital to bring it up to the most modern safety standards.

So the company and board of the theatre have decided to launch a fundraising campaign of their own, starting on October 17th, when the Dubliners will give a concert in the Radisson. Some weeks later, there will be a traditional night in Monroe's, and other events are planned. If you would like to help get this show on the road again in any way, please contact Séamus O'Aodha in the Taidhbhearc, Middle Street, telephone 091 562 024.

Our first illustration is of a drawing of the interior done by Raymond Piper in 1949 which shows the famous curtain designed by MacLiammóir

No. 2 shows Siobhán McKenna playing St. Joan, the part which made her famous.

No. 3 is of Michael 'Killers' Kilkelly and John Lillis playing enclosed monks in the annual summer entertainment that was 'Seoda'.

No. 4 shows Cyril Mahony and Mick Lally in a production of 'Sé dúirt Polonius'.

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Please forward any queries/comments to oldgalway@kennys.ie

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