

**S**ince the glamorous night of its opening on 27th November 1871, with the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland as Guest of Honour and a double bill of Goldsmith's evergreen comedy "She Stoops to Conquer" followed by the tuneful burlesque "La Belle Sauvage", The Gaiety Theatre has remained true to the vision of its founders in presenting the highest quality musical and dramatic entertainment. As Dublin's longest established theatre in continuous production, The Gaiety triumphantly maintains its unrivalled presence as the city's premier venue for popular musical shows, opera, ballet, dance and drama.



The inspiration behind The Gaiety Theatre came from the energetic Gunn brothers, John and Michael, whose background was a family music business on Grafton Street. They engaged the eminent architect C.J. Phipps, whose original design in the manner of the traditional European opera house has given us the essential Gaiety, with its handsome Venetian façade, familiar to us all. Astonishingly, only 25 weeks elapsed between the laying of the foundations and the opening night - the contractors working a 24-hour shift! After twelve years of marked success, the most distinguished theatre architect of the day, Frank Matcham, was brought in to create the commodious parterre and dress-circle bars in the extension to the west of the auditorium, which he then redecorated. Thus, we have Phipps to thank for the Gaiety's elegant form, and Matcham for its charming baroque adornments.

Phipps' theatre had three balconies. In 1955, mainly for reasons of safety, the steep top gallery - known as 'the gods' - was removed, and the centre balcony extended backwards to create the present Grand and Upper Circles. Other improvements to the public spaces were made at the same time. In 1984 the backstage area was rebuilt with a levelling of the old 'raked' stage and the installation of a modern counterweight system for flying scenery.

Changes of ownership does not greatly concern audiences as long as the comfort of the auditorium and the standard of what is seen on the stage are maintained. Successive managements have seen to these essentials; the two, which probably left the most enduring mark in the 20th century, were the Louis Elliman Group from 1936 to 1965, and Eamon Andrews studios from 1965 to 1984. It was 'Mr Louis' who instituted the home-produced - as distinct from imported - Christmas pantomimes. He engaged O'D Productions - the comedy writer Barry O'Donovan and his professional partner, the incomparable comedian Jimmy O'Dea - to present the panto, and also the annual summer variety show. O'Dea was later joined by the young Maureen Potter, who quickly established herself as 'Ireland's Queen of Comedy'. To two generations of Dubliners the name 'The Gaiety' was synonymous with the sparkle, the fun, the magic and, yes, The Gaiety of their performances.

It was also under Louis Elliman that the Dublin Grand Opera Society established its two annual seasons, now continued by Opera Ireland. These replaced the regular visits of the celebrated Moody Manners Opera Company, the Carl Rosa Opera, and the O'Mara Opera Company, when operatic touring ceased around mid-century due to prohibitively rising costs. During World War II, when the staple product of West End successes came to an end, Louis Elliman invited Hilton Edwards and Micheál MacLiammóir, founders of Dublin's Gate Theatre Productions, to give Spring and Autumn seasons of plays each year. Many regard these as 'the boys' best work, for The Gaiety had the space and the technical facilities to give real scope for MacLiammóir's rich scenic and costume designs and Edwards' dynamic staging.

Among their Gaiety successes were Shakespeare's Richard II, Anthony and Cleopatra, Julius Caesar and Hamlet, Maura Laverty's perennially popular Liffey Lane and Tolka Row and MacLiammóir's own romantic comedies "Where Stars Walk" and "Ill Met by Moonlight". His quintessential The Importance of Being Oscar began its nine years of international touring at The Gaiety in 1960. It was during the Eamonn Andrews era that the Gaiety's audience swelled on one famous night to 400 million for the 1971 Eurovision Song Contest - the first to be held in Ireland, and RTE's earliest colour transmission of an indoor event, the Gaiety's pretty interior receiving much praise from around the world.



'If stones could speak', the sturdy walls of The Gaiety would be excused for indulging in a lengthy monologue of name-dropping, for the house has witnessed the comings and goings of more famous figures and faces of the musical and dramatic stage than any building in this country. Space allows mention of but a few: in ballet, Pavlova, Markova, Krassovska and Dolin; in opera, Salvini, Pavarotti, Joan Sutherland and, in our own time, Veronica Dunne and Bernadette Greevy; among the stars of variety, Jack Benny, Noel Purcell, Julie Andrews; among the great actors, Edwin Booth, Henry Irving, Ellen Terry, Sara Bernhardt, Mrs Patrick Campbell, Sybil Thorndyke and more recently, Siobhan McKenna, Peter O'Toole, Ray McAnally and Michael Gambon.

During the 50's and 60's The Gaiety was the venue for Sunday night concerts with the Radio Éireann symphony Orchestra, with guest conductors such as Barbirolli, Fielder and Zecchi, and distinguished soloists like Menuhin, Tortelier and Rostropovich. Companies of exceptionally varied style and composition have graced the Gaiety's stage from the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company in Gilbert and Sullivan to the MacDona Players who performed exclusively the plays of George Bernard Shaw; from the Rathmines & Rathgar Musical Society with its succession of operettas and musicals as different as Romberg and Rodgers & Hammerstein, to the Spanish dance companies of Pilar Lopez, José Greco and Teresa & Luisillo. The Gaiety has been the venue for such diverse attractions as the earliest Irish language performance on a professional stage, Douglas Hyde's Casadh an t-Sugáin in 1901, Sean O'Casey's controversial The Bishop's Bonfire in 1955, and Norman Maen's production of Finian's Rainbow in 1964, in which Jimmy O'Dea made his last stage appearance, with the haunting final line, 'We'll meet in Gloucamorra, some fine day. The Gaiety Theatre's present owners, Denis and Caroline Desmond, and its

Managing Director, John Costigan, have instituted an extensive conservation programme. In 2003, the owners Denis and Caroline Desmond invested over €2.15 million in the biggest restoration programme The Gaiety Theatre has seen in over 50 years including the installation of an air conditioning system and new seating with increased legroom for improved patron comfort.

Maureen Potter- who was the smiling face of The Gaiety to thousands of Dubliners - said that 'The Gaiety is the most aptly named place I know'. Cyril Cusack once referred to 'the fair balance of tragedy and comedy, of merriment and wisdom, and not without a proper ingredient of controversy'. In his autobiography, Micheál MacLiammóir wrote of The Gaiety as 'a place of breadth and dignity' and Milo O'Shea has written that 'Dublin without The Gaiety would be a city bereft of an important element of glamour and excitement'. It is plain that under its present benign management, this glamour and excitement is set to continue.

The Gaiety Theatre closed on Sunday 4th February 2007 for five months to undertake the biggest refurbishment scheme the Theatre has seen in its history at a cost of €9.5 million.



The Theatre is indebted to the Minister of Arts, Sport and Tourism, Minister John O'Donoghue TD, for awarding a very generous grant of €7.5 million with the Theatre owners, Denis and Caroline Desmond, contributing €2 million towards the cost of the project. The works concluded with the complete rebuild of the stage including enlargement of orchestra, stage and scenery flying accommodation. Other works included dressing room upgrades; fire upgrades throughout the premises; roof works and refurbishment of front of house and bar areas. The fruits of these works will enable the Theatre to programme a wider repertoire of productions enhancing the cultural life of the city as well as ensuring the future of The Gaiety Theatre.