

The History of Irish Cinemas

Part 2: Cine-Variety in Dublin

MARC ZIMMERMANN investigates aspects of Irish cinemas.

THE RISE OF CINE-VARIETY

By the time 'moving pictures' were conceived, stage theatres and live performances could already look back at a long, illustrious history. Considering the often large auditoria and the ease of setting up a film screening with a roll-down canvas and freestanding projector, theatres were the obvious location choice for the first film presentations, starting out at Dublin's **PALACE THEATRE OF VARIETIES** in 1896.

Especially during their first decade films were still rather short and even a collection of these brief scenes (initially of low image quality) could not sustain a venue as its sole entertainment offering. While it may have been difficult to combine films with stage plays, it seemed quite suitable to insert such screenings into a type of entertainment that had already been popular for decades in music halls, such as the **STAR OF ERIN** (opened 1879), today's **OLYMPIA**. Combining stage and screen, cine-variety was born. Rather than conventionally staging plays, cine-variety combined a number of live acts with at least one film screening. The ever-changing stage performances included comedy routines, acrobats, singers, entertainers and magicians. One of the first venues to adopt regular film shows as part of a cine-variety programme was the **QUEEN'S THEATRE** in 1908. With the opening of the **VOLTA** in 1909 the new breed of dedicated cinemas split from cine-variety theatres and both types of venues mushroomed around the country during the early 1900s.

VARIETY ACTS & MOVIES

The great range of performers included local and international talent, many of whom returned frequently with new acts. On occasion even popular actors made an appearance. Throughout the decades entertainers included such diverse stars as James Cagney, Judy Garland and the Three Stooges. In 1954 beloved cowboy Roy Rogers and his famous horse Trigger -adored by masses of children in over 200 films and TV shows- entertained audiences at the **THEATRE ROYAL**. Further entertainment at this landmark theatre was provided by its resident twenty-five-piece orchestra and its popular dance troupe, The Royalettes.

The films that formed part of cine-variety programmes were initially rather short and listings often simply referred to the collated, short animated scenes as 'new bioscope pictures'. Throughout the decades the films that were screened grew in length, and eventually full-length features such as the Western *Backlash* or the comedy drama *The Girl He Left Behind* (both US 1956) were incorporated into the shows.



Musical and acrobatic variety acts in the 1950s © Marc Zimmermann

DUBLIN VARIETY VENUES

Several stage theatres that had been established before the early-1900s boom in moving pic-

tures could be anticipated were adapted to incorporate screenings. Projection technology was added to venues such as the **TIVOLI** (Burgh Quay) and the second **THEATRE ROYAL**, both of which had opened in 1897.

Initially this simply included a screen and projector, while in 1910 separate projection boxes became mandatory. Following the arrival of the talkies in 1927, loudspeakers were added. Other venues were built specifically for stage acts and film shows, such as the striking but short-lived 3,000-seat **COLISEUM** (Henry Street, 1915-16), which fell victim to a devastating blaze during the worst fighting of the Easter Rising.

Unlike many dedicated cinemas, variety theatres were equipped with raised stages and changing facilities for the artists. Some larger venues even featured an organ, offering entertainment during the interludes. Films were presented on a screen that was often smaller than a cinema's. This was sometimes incorporated in the decorated safety curtain as a whitened, framed rectangle, as it was the case at the **OLYMPIA** (see right).



The **OLYMPIA**'s safety curtain with its small cinema screen insert in 1979 © Irish Architectural Archive

Spanning half a century, from the early 1900s to the late 1950s, cine-variety reached the peak of its popularity during the 1930s when venues had grown progressively larger and more lavishly appointed. Cinema, too, peaked during this Golden Age and people flocked to sumptuous, large-scale venues such as the newly-built, Art Deco inspired

THEATRE ROYAL (opened 1935). Few cine-variety theatres, such as the **TIVOLI**, were now converted to full-time picture houses.

Cinemas and variety theatres occasionally opened their doors to more unusual events. On its wide stage the **ADELPHI** (Abbey Street) hosted several popular concerts, including a 1963 performance by the Beatles -attracting droves of screaming young women and a police force struggling to maintain order- as well as concerts by Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong and the Rolling Stones. During the 1970s the **CARLTON** presented Johnny Cash, Marlene Dietrich, Fats Domino and Duke Ellington in his final performance.

LA SCALA cinema even staged a boxing championship match in 1923 -McTigue vs. Siki- in the midst of the civil war, its audience barely escaping a bomb plot (see the TG4 documentary *A Bloody Canvas*). The **THEATRE ROYAL** hosted another bout in 1945, during a charitable event.

DECLINE & LEGACY

Attendances in cinemas -and to some extent in theatres- had been slowly declining since the 1940s and subsequently took a dive in the decades following 1955, when television broadcasts began to reach Ireland. By the late 1950s cine-variety's appeal had waned considerably around the country, and the majority of venues had by now fully reverted to either presenting solely stage shows or films. Especially larger venues struggled to fill their auditoria, and venues such as the 3,850-seat landmark **THEATRE ROYAL** were forced to close.

Many cinemas now began to combat dwindling audiences by first converting to widescreen presentations -such as CinemaScope- from 1954 onwards, and later by subdividing their screens, mainly throughout the 1970s. Having abandoned variety acts, surviving theatres attempted to fill their smaller auditoria with new, interesting plays.

Although cine-variety has rarely been presented for half a century, many patrons still fondly remember the days when singers, entertainers and cowboys mingled on stage for a colourful mix of evening-long entertainment that always included new adventures on screen.

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