

ECHO FEATURES

On December 12, 1955, the Opera House burned to the ground. To mark the anniversary, JO KERRIGAN spoke to people who were there on that fateful night

FOR the older generation of Corkonians, December 12, 1955, is forever etched in the memory. Every one of them can remember where he or she was that wild and stormy night when the old Opera House burned down.

Billa O'Connell was rehearsing *The Sleeping Beauty* upstairs. He recalls: "We heard this odd crackling sound but thought it was the Tiny Tots tapdancing below. Then someone smelled smoke and Bill Twomey rang the fire brigade. I was standing right next to Bill when he rang and remember him saying, 'No clanging bells now, we don't want to cause alarm unnecessarily.'"

"We went out of the theatre and somebody asked Jim Stack, who was directing, if that was the end of it for the evening. Stackie said: 'We'll see what transpires and then maybe we'll get back in to rehearse again later on.' But none of us could ever go back. It would have been my first Opera House appearance."

The Tiny Tots of 50 years ago remember it vividly too. "We were dancing away," recalls one, "and suddenly Edna McBirney, who was playing the piano, told us to stop, get our coats on, and go over to the *Cork Examiner* immediately to wait for our parents. We thought we'd done something wrong."

Across the road in Joan Denise Moriarty's first-floor studio, the ballet company was also rehearsing — until someone glanced out of the window and shrieked in horror.

Harold Johnson, one of the most indefatigable workers involved in the rebuilding of the theatre afterwards, was playing badminton out by the Victoria Hospital when one of his friends spotted the smoke. "We walked back to see what was happening and as we got closer the flames started to leap up. I had a sick feeling inside and kept saying to myself, 'please don't let it be the Opera House.'"

He met his wife-to-be, Chloe, off the *Innisfallen* next morning and told her something dreadful had happened. "She said, 'Is someone dead?' I said, 'Oh no, far, far worse. The Opera House has burned down.'"

That was how it hit all the people of Cork. For a 100 years the city had known, patronised and loved this grand old theatre. Children got their first taste of pantomime there, courting couples rushed for the early doors, crowds of young people



BLACK DAY FOR CORK: The Opera House ablaze in December, 1955

Fifty years on, we still remember

packed the gallery to see dance, drama, opera and ballet.

Amateur companies too depended on it: The Operatic had just finished *The Belle of New York*, the G&S were preparing *Princess Ida*.

Providentially, it was one of the very few occasions in the year when the auditorium was not packed — this only happened when the Christmas pantomime was in rehearsal.

Over on Sullivan's Quay, Frank Byrne of Hickey & Byrne was peacefully setting up the type for the pantomime posters, little realising the disaster taking place less than a mile away. "I cherish that first proof I made

because it was the last — I suppose you could call it The Pantomime That Never Was."

Donie Gleeson was a driver for the *Examiner*; he and his colleagues quickly started moving the vans from the garage in Half Moon Street to a safer location. He remembers Tom Crosbie ordering tea and sandwiches to be sent over to them from the Victoria. "The metal roof of the garage was red hot by then, and the sound of the timbers burning on the Opera House roof was the most frightening thing I ever experienced."

Firemen risking their lives in the burning building heard barrels cracking open in the bar and the stout

flowing out. One quipped to another, "That's the first drink the Opera House has ever given away."

Silent crowds massed on the quays, on the bridges, watching as the beloved old theatre endured its final act. As the gallery lurched and toppled into the pit, an involuntary groan burst from thousands of throats. "It was terrible, it was awful to watch, but we had to be there," said one woman.

Although the telegrams flooded in from famous names — Lord Longford, Michael McLiammoir, Cyril Cusack — the real mourners on that stormy night of wind and rain in December, 1955, were the people of Cork.

O'Shea on Monday



Tough times for Double-O Seacht

ACCORDING to Minister for Justice Michael McDowell, there is no secret service in this country — despite the fact it has been allocated €800,000 in the budget by Brian Cowen for the next year. — *Irish Examiner*, last Friday.

ROBERT O'SHEA on the possibility of our very own James Bond in this country

James returned his skis to the closet. M had just been on the phone with the news. There would be no trip to Geneva this year either.

"€800,000!" he had barked down the phone. "A measly 800 grand."

"It's not enough, is it?"

"Did you tell McDowell about the Russians?"

"Yes."

"And what did he say?"

"He said the secret service doesn't exist?"

"Ha!" said James, and he had slammed down the receiver.

Someone was following him. He applied the brakes and his Raleigh came to a screeching halt. He dismounted and rolled his bicycle to the lamppost outside a public house. He removed both lights, pocketed them and fastened the frame to the post with his lock. He entered the pub.

"Martini, shook," he said to the barman.

"Don't have Martini," came the reply.

"OK, I'll have a Guinness, but could you swish it around a bit while it settles?"

The barman eyed him curiously as he pulled the pint. As he did, James took in the room. A woman with short, dark hair and wearing sunglasses emerged from the Ladies. A long beige trenchcoat was buckled around her impressively slim waist and her red stilettos carried her right past James and out the door. He followed her.

Outside he found his lock dangling around the lamppost, minus a bike.

"Spectre!" he muttered under his breath.

What the hell, it was about time he got an upgrade.

Q smiled at him. "No," he said.

"How about a BMW then?"

"No."

"Merc?"

"Er, no."

"Well what can they afford for me?" said James, losing his patience.

Q avoided eye contact.

"A Honda."

"A Honda. Hmmm."

"A Honda 50."

James groaned.

"You know we can't just hand out cars to members of the Civil Service willy-nilly."

Q, sensing his disappointment, changed the subject.

"Look at this watch Double-O Seacht." He pulled up his sleeve and held his arm out. To James it looked like an ordinary wristwatch.

"What does it do?" he asked.

"Do?" said Q. "Well, it can reach a depth of 50m. And if you press this button it glows and you can tell the time in the dark."

"What good is that to me?" James sighed.

"Not much I suspect ... Oh no, you don't understand: it's my watch. A retirement gift. Voluntary — I got a good deal. Said they couldn't afford to keep me on the wage bill. Moneypenny's gone as well."

Moneypenny, thought James. Leaving. He had always had a crush on her but had never acted on it. Except that one time at the Christmas party. And she had been cool to him ever since then, always with that inscrutable smile playing on her lips.

"Could we have the bike lights back," Q added, as if as an afterthought.

"We're letting you go." It was M on the phone again.

"Where?" said James, images of Geneva, Turin, Belgrade rushing through his mind.

"No James. We're just letting you go."

"I'm being sacked? But what are you going to do with the €800,000?"

"We're replacing you. You know that we have to replace our agents every few years to keep it all hush-hush. I think you have met your replacement. She took your bike the other day."

"But I didn't get to do anything. No skiing. No intrigue. No lovemaking. No master criminals. What kind of secret agent story is this?"

"I know we thought he was dead, but I think your predecessor might have something to do with it."

"Double-O Sé. I should have guessed he was behind this."