

Wallace, Balfe and Mr. Bunn

The official re-opening and re-dedication of the splendidly refurbished Theatre Royal, was a night of wonderful memories – memories that around us hover – new memories to cherish and take us into scenes that will be brighter in happy moments.

Ben Barnes, Director of the theatre, showed a great respect for the history and future of this great theatre and he welcomed the guests and audience from the stage. The Mayor, Cllr John Halligan, made a powerful and passionate plea for continued national support for the arts in these times of changing realities. He expressed the immense pride Waterford people have for the cherished treasure on The Mall.

Eamon Flavin, Chairman of The Theatre Royal, remembered absent friends, who dedicated themselves to the survival of the Royal, Dick Doyle and Larry Fanning, whose life's work ensured we would have a theatre to celebrate. He rightly praised Ben Barnes as being the right man, in the right place, at the right time.

Pat Moylan, Director of The Arts Council, deputising for Arts Minister, Martin Cullen, to formally re-dedicate the Royal. She spoke of Minister Cullen's pride in all things Waterford and said he cannot be accused of underselling his home city. She spoke of the wealth of the nation, that could not just be measured in euros and cents but in the rich arts heritage that nourishes and sustains the nation. She fondly remembered the grand fame of theatre, Anna Manahan, and the present arts family of Waterford.

The Play

Described as a musical play in two acts, Wallace Balfe and Mr. Bunn, was an amusing extravaganza of memory, where The Theatre Royal, with a full orchestra, welcomed back for a limited engagement, three of the famous composers whose work carried the musical fame of Ireland abroad and down through the years. Composers, whose work became known as The Irish Ring, Wallace, Balfe and Benedict.

Written specially by Bernard Farrell, he cleverly chose the link to the three composers as the librettist, poet, theatre manager and impresario, Alfred Bunn. Bunn was an almost forgotten character at Drury Lane, who wrote many poems and words for Balfe's operas and the words for two songs from Wallace's *Maritana*. Bunn was anxious to be remembered and he wrote three volumes in 1840, *The Stage Before And Behind The Curtain*, to extol his achievements and virtues.

Almost, at times, like an Old Thyme Music Hall act, the foibles and rivalry of Wallace and Balfe were explored, within a modern setting being revisited by the composers in a wonderful theatrical act of imagination and memory. At times dialogue and exposition was laboured but throughout it all, the fine wonderful music bubbled up from the pit under Kevin O'Carroll's inspired direction and filled the theatre with a warm satisfying glow of the magic of wonderful music.

Carol McCarthy and an excellent chorus in Gypsy dress charmed the audience with the wonder of Wallace and the beauty of Balfe. The Angelus Chorus lifted us up where angels hover. Dominic McGorian delighted in *Scenes That Are Brightest*, Orla Colleton impressed with *When Other Lips And Other Hearts (That You'll Remember Me)*. Brendan Payne duetted from the balcony with McGorian on *The Moon Hath Raised Her Lamp Above* to great effect.

However it was the splendid soprano tones of Caroline Reid O'Brien that took this production to a higher plane with a gorgeous *I Dreamt I Dwelt In Marble Halls*.

Shauna Farrell, actress/Director, shone as a temptress to Wallace and a modern photographer. Darragh Kelly caught the roguishness of Wallace and Sean Campion put prim and proper flesh on the rivalry of Balfe. Malcolm Adams was an axious

fame-seeking Mr. Bunn and he indeed did make Bunn memorable.

Des Manahan was superb as the dodderly Sir Julius Benedict and his Cheerie Pip Chaps and his wonderful, almost throw-away line - Well I'm not saying, I've never seen a better night - was a gem of style.

There was a magic moment towards the end, as chorus and orchestra made memories hover around the theatre and Mr. Bunn would not be forgotten and Balfe celebrated and Wallace remembered, but not just for a bronze bust near the theatre or a Plaza on the Quay, but in the hearts of future theatregoers, who would make and cherish new memories.