

HISTORY OF LISLEA DRAMA FESTIVAL (Jim McParland)

From the turn of the century drama has been a large part of the leisure of the rural community. Each parish had at least one dramatic society, which produced a play yearly and performed it in the small rural halls of the area. There was always an excitement about such productions and full houses were assured. With the arrival of television to rural Ireland in the early 1960's, however, audiences began to dwindle and interest in the local stage began to fade.

It was this backdrop - the demise of local drama - that inspired the community of Lislea, with its long history of drama in the heart of South Armagh, to establish a Rural Drama Festival.

The first Lislea Rural Drama Festival started on 29th January 1982. In his address on the opening night the Chairman of the Drama Committee, Eugene Hannaway, said that the *"dream is to re-establish rural drama, to give it back the place it once had in the rural community and to present to the people once more the works of old masters like O'Casey, Shiels and Synge"*.

During the period 29th January – 14th February of that year, large audiences turned out in the Lislea Youth Club to support Mullaghbawn's "St. Judes", Glassdrummond's "Lake End Players", Ballymacnab, Saval, Lislea and the "Droll Players" from Ballynahinch. The groups offered a feast of entertainment such as "All the King's Horses", "Professor Tim", and "The Rale McCoy". Such was the demand for seats that on most nights during that fortnight the club was packed to capacity (indeed on two occasions people had to be unfortunately turned away).

During that first festival the adjudicator was Bill McKay Kenny. Avuncular in manner, he was a man with a deep love for the amateur theatre. His warmth and enthusiasm flowed across the footlights, charming actors, groups and audiences.

That year there were five awards. The premier award was the Francis McParland Memorial Cup named after one of the founder members of the Lislea Dramatic Players in 1940 and one of that group's most accomplished actors. The trophy presented to the group that came second was the Corn Ni hAodha (or Cissie Hughes Cup), named after the first director of Lislea Dramatic Players, a gentle lady who did much to establish drama in Lislea.

In the final adjudication Sadie McParland presented the The Premier Award to Joe Murphy, the producer of the winning play, "Anyone Can Rob a Bank". Saval and the Lake End Players were joint runners up; Michael McCann won the Best Actor award for his

wonderful portrayal of the befuddled know-all grocer 'Badger Grey'. Lislea also collected the award for Best Producer (Joe Murphy). So impressed was Bill McKay Kenny with the Lislea Festival, that he, in a typically generous and much appreciated gesture, donated a cup to the festival with the recommendation that it should be awarded, each year, for the most interesting set design.

The following year the festival moved to later in February (24th – 11th March 1983) and it attracted seven groups, including for the first time the Forge Players from Castledawson, Co. Derry. This company under the guidance of Barney Devlin were to become regular visitors to Lislea over the years.

The adjudicator in 1983 was Roma Tomelty Carnegie, a lady with an interest in all aspects of the amateur stage and a great respect for the Irish play. On the final night of the festival Roma was joined on stage by her father, Joseph Tomelty. Although frail after a serious accident he had agreed to present the prizes. First though, he had his own drama to experience, when the chair he was sitting on collapsed and he fell rather heavily to the floor of the stage. Thankfully he was unscathed and like the trouper he was continued with the final awards ceremony where the Premier Award went to the Priory Players from Benburb with "The Courting of Mary Doyle". Roma and the Carnegie family presented a cup to the festival in memory of her grandmother. The "Min Milligan Cup" would be awarded in future festivals for the best character portrayal (either male or female). That year the Terence O'Hanlon Cup (Audience Award) was won for the first time by the Forge Players with the George Shiels play "Moodie in Manitoba".

In 1984, Jim McCart, the Chairman of Newry and Mourne District Council, opened the Lislea Festival. The adjudicator was Lynda Henderson, who had close connections with Rostrevor, and there were eight entries with the Premier Award being collected by the Lislea Dramatic Players for "The Money Doesn't Matter".

By 1985 the festival had gone from strength to strength. That year, Bertil Gallagher, a member of the executive committee of the All-Ireland Drama Council, performed the opening ceremony. In his speech he said "*the reputation of this Festival, both here in the North of Ireland and in the South, is considerable; which is very rewarding as it is festivals like that of Lislea's, that keep drama alive*".

1985 also saw the introduction of the Lislea Drama Festival logo – the bardic character, the book and Slieve Gullion framed by the trees that used to cover this south Armagh area. Designed by the publicity officer, Jim McParland and sketched by Tony McParland, the logo has been used on programmes and festival literature ever since.

One of the biggest cheers of the 1985 Festival was for a fifteen-year-old mongrel "Lass" who played the role of 'Leggy' in Lislea's production "The Wood of the Whispering". Sadly she won no awards (there was no best canine performance cup!), but the play did win the Premier Award. The Terence O'Hanlon Cup was awarded that year for the Best Moment of Theatre and the new Laverty-Eustace Perpetual Cup (Audience Award) – in honour of a former teacher in Lislea Primary School – was presented for the first time to Ballymacnab for "My Favourite Family".

The 1986 Lislea Drama Festival (the Rural was dropped that year) was opened by the B.B.C. radio and T.V. personality Seamus McKee. Extensive renovation work to the old Lislea school building had commenced a few short months earlier and the final preparations for the festival (the erecting of curtains, cleaning etc.) were still going on, barely one hour before 'curtain up'.

In his witty and amusing opening address, Seamus McKee spoke about a tradition in the area of which the people can be justifiably proud. He expressed the hope that the newly renovated Hall would provide a wonderful venue for the young people (and the not so young), to continue this good work.

"How wonderful it is in Lislea that its school should become its playhouse".

Unfortunately the new playhouse audience did not see the home team perform that year. With no rehearsal facilities while work was in progress the Lislea Dramatic Players did not participate in the 1986 Festival. Roma Tomelty Carnegie returned to adjudicate and in her final adjudication the Premier Award went to Moneyglass with Brian Friel's "The Freedom of the City" under the production of Alec McCoy.

In 1987 – the "Dry Sack" sponsored Festival – Bill McKay Kenny returned to Lislea as adjudicator. The Chairman of Newry and Mourne District Council, Eugene Markey, said that the Lislea Festival was *"an established part of the Northern Ireland Drama circuit"* before handing over to Alf McCreary, author, journalist, broadcaster and native of Bessbrook, to officially open the festival. He said he was delighted to be associated with the Lislea Festival, *" it reflects the positive side of South Armagh which unfortunately does not receive the same amount of publicity that acts of violence attract"*. In his comments we were reminded of the difficult background in which the Lislea Festival was organised in the 1980's and early 1990's.

The Lislea Dramatic Players who did not compete in 1986 returned in style in 1987 when, with the highly enjoyable "The King of Fridays Men", they again won the Premier Award.

In 1988 the adjudicator was May McHenry, at that time, one of Ireland's most prolific producers in drama. In her final adjudication she spoke of how greatly impressed she was with the Lislea Drama Festival, *"this lovely part of South Armagh has many amateur dramatic groups who possess characters so able, they are almost professional on the stage and long may it continue"*. As a reminder of her time with Lislea she presented the committee with two shields with the recommendation that they be awarded "at the adjudicator's discretion".

Ulster television personality and journalist Anne Hailes officially opened the 1989 Festival. Having read through previous programmes about how the community in Lislea all play a part in the organising of the festival, she said *"in a rural community like Lislea, the theatre and drama in general can be very important in bringing people together and fostering a strong community spirit"*. That year saw the first appearance in the Lislea Festival of the Cuchulainn Dramatic Players (under the direction of Pius Tierney) with "The Righteous are Bold". It was a particularly productive debut for this powerful drama when Cuchulainn became the first group in the history of the Lislea Drama Festival to win five awards – including the Premier Award, Best Actress (Brieger Tierney) and the Audience Award. The adjudicator John Keyes felt that the 1989 Festival had been a 'vintage' one; *"rural drama is the very roots of the professional theatre. The Lyric in Belfast and the Abbey in Dublin have risen from these roots and given theatre to the world. It is for this reason that festivals like Lislea's are so vital and so important"*.

1990 was the year the Lislea Dramatic Players celebrated their Golden Jubilee (they first performed in 1940 with "The Playboy" (Our Boys) and "His Only Chance") and Pat Hannaway, Honorary President of the Drama Committee and who had been involved in those first productions, officially opened the festival. The adjudicator was Margaret D'arcy and she awarded the Premier Award to Lislea with their production of Thomas Murphy's "A Crucial Week in the Life of a Grocer's Assistant". The two Mullaghbawn drama groups (St. Jude's and Cuchulainn) were joint runners up.

The 1991 Festival was tinged with sadness owing to the recent death of Bill McKay Kenny. He had been a great friend of Lislea throughout the previous nine years. He had been supportive of the Festival since its inception, offering encouragement and advice when necessary.

The adjudicator that year was Tomas MacAnna, from the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. A native of Dundalk, he showed himself to be a 'giant of the Theatre' throughout the duration of the Festival,

whether it was through his informative and humorous comments and advice, his observations, or the range of his many funny anecdotes. Each night he gave his own performance, gently educating and above all entertaining the audience. It was a reflection of this 'entertainment' at the end of each production, that very few people left the auditorium before Tomas MacAnna had come off the stage. The Premier Award for the festival went to the Lislea Players with "Tarry Flynn" by Patrick Kavanagh.

On the 19th May 1992, the death occurred of Cissie Hughes, the founder of the Lislea Dramatic Players in 1940. A woman of versatility, she managed to instil in her youthful players a love and enthusiasm for the stage. She will continue to be remembered at Lislea Festivals because she donated the Corn Ni hAodha. Her last appearance on the stage in Lislea was the presentation of this trophy at the first Festival in 1982.

Charlie Smyth who recalled fond memories of the Lislea stage opened the 1992 Festival and playing to great audiences in the 1950's; "today the faces and names may have changed but the audience is still appreciative of good drama and talented acting". Kathleen Barrington was the adjudicator that year and the Castle Players from Dundalk won the Premier Award with "All the Way Back" by Bernard Farrell.

Tomas MacAnna returned as adjudicator in 1993 when Frank Hall opened the Festival, a local man who became a household name on Telifis Eireann (RTE) with his satirical programme "Hall's Pictorial Weekly". Moneyglass Dramatic Society won the Premier Award with "Freedom of the City" and in his closing remarks Tomas MacAnna said; "*I have been to many venues throughout Ireland but Lislea is one of the best Festivals it has been my privilege to adjudicate*".

In 1994 the Festival attracted eight groups from a wide area, Castledawson Co. Derry, Moneyglass Co Antrim, Pomeroy Co. Tyrone, Corcaghan Co. Monaghan and Trim Co. Meath. Roma Tomelty returned after eight years as adjudicator and during the Festival the Lislea audiences were to see some excellent entertainment. Mary Murphy from Lislea won the Best Actress Award for her 'Big Maggie' and Trim A.D.S. making their Lislea debut won three awards (including the Premier Award) for their production of Arthur Millar's "The Crucible". There was also success for the Castleblaney Players who scooped four awards including the one for runners up.

John Keyes returned as adjudicator in 1995 when the outstanding performance of the Festival was from the Duleek Drama Group from Co. Meath. They came to Lislea and performed J.B. Keane's "Sive" which the adjudicator described as "*the best production of 'Sive', either amateur or professional, that I have seen.*" After the final adjudication local newspapers used the heading "Duleek sweep the

boards" as this talented group won six awards including the Premier Award, Best Producer and Best Actress (Betty Clinton as Mena Clavin).

The 15th Lislea Drama Festival in 1996 was opened by Ireland's newest Senator, Sam McAughtry, veteran writer, journalist and broadcaster who thoroughly entertained the audience with a hilarious tale of romantic intrigue on his first ever visit to Dublin, just after the Second World War. The adjudicator was Roy Alcorn and groups as far apart as Wexford and Donegal performed the programme of seven plays. From the humble beginnings of 1982, Lislea was now attracting groups from all over Ireland. The Premier Award went to St. Dymphna's Dramatic Society from Co. Tyrone with "All in Favour Say No" by Bernard Farrell. In his concluding remarks, Roy Alcorn said; *"I have been amazed by the sheer professionalism of the organisation and the packed houses – the quality of the productions places Lislea right at the top of the Ulster Drama circuit"*.

In 1997 Bertil Gallagher returned to open the Lislea Festival, having performed the same ceremony in 1982; *"in my many trips since that first Festival night, I am pleased that such excellent progress has been made"*. New groups came to Lislea that year such as Bessbrook Community Players and Stageaid from Gilford but it was the Castleblaney Players that caught the attention. In the world of television, Dennis Potter's play "Blue Remembered Hills" is famously remembered by the award winning performances of adult actors in the roles of children. The Castleblaney group performed this absorbing modern play about the world as seen through the eyes of a child and they were rewarded with three awards including the Premier Award. The adjudicator, Martin Dempsey said *"it was one of those nights when everything came together so well"*. Later in the year this group went on to win the All-Ireland Festival with the same play.

Lislea picked up one award at that Festival when Mickey McCann won the award for Best Character Portrayal for his playing of the role of John Henly in "The New Gassoon". The adjudicator gave the highest praise for a superb performance in a small character part; *"Here was an actor who believed utterly in what he was doing"*. Sadly this was to be his final Festival performance.

Just prior to the opening of the 1998 Festival this inspirational actor died. Michael John McCann made an enormous contribution to theatre and drama in Lislea as an actor, producer, administrator and friend. He had been closely involved with every aspect of the Festival since 1982 and all who knew him would miss his encouragement and humorous stories.

Aiden McQuillan a member of the All-Ireland winning Castleblaney Players opened the festival and he spoke about *"the spirit of friendship and camaraderie that prevails as an integral part of this Festival"*. The adjudicator was Jimmy McClatchie and he awarded first place to the Pomeroy Players from Co. Tyrone for their production of "Da" by Hugh Leonard *"This was the first time I had heard the play performed with non-Dublin accents and it worked extremely well"*.

In 1999 Roy Alcorn stepped in at the last minute as adjudicator to deputise for William Burns who was ill. The Premier Award for the last Festival of the 20th century went to Lislea (and their producer Joe Murphy) just as they had done in 1982. Thus the book-ends were in place for both the Lislea Dramatic Players and their producer, cradling eighteen years that included seven Premier Awards and a host of memories, many humorous but some sad.

The 19th Lislea Drama Festival opened on Friday 25th February 2000. The Festival which had started out in the inadequate facilities that was the Lislea Youth Club were now in the same building but after a £250,000 refurbishment the facilities were second to none, the relative opulence of these new surroundings compensating, in some belated way, for the discomforts of the past.

The adjudicator was Tommy McArdle who over the years had achieved great success as an actor, producer and for ten years was director of R.T.E.'s "Glenroe". The awards were divided between the Backburner's Drama Circle Co. Tyrone who performed Friel's "The Loves of Cass Maguire" (they won the Premier Award) and Stageaid from Gilford whose production; "Love Knows No Right-A-Way" (written by their director, Armand Gaillard) received the runners up award.

The 2001 Festival opened in February as usual when the Bessbrook Community Players performed Sam Cree's "Cupid Wore Skirts". However unlike any other year it had to be closed after three nights due to the outbreak of foot and mouth disease which devastated rural parts of England, Scotland, Wales and cast a dark worrying shadow across south Armagh and beyond.

After an almost four week hiatus, the Festival resumed and still attracted large audiences. The adjudicator was Anne Maloney-O'Driscoll from Dublin and in her final adjudication Lislea's production of "Kevin's Bed" by Bernard Farrell won the Premier Award, Best Producer Award (Joe Murphy) and the award for Best Actor (Aiden McParland).

As we prepare for Festival 2002 we can reflect on what has been achieved over twenty years. Lislea is now recognized over a wide area as the "friendly festival". It attracts drama groups (almost

forty in twenty years) from all parts of the country. It is associated with a warm and welcoming audience and always, an interesting selection of entertainment.

The survival and success of the Lislea Drama Festival must be ascribed to the commitment of a community - an entire community - to ensuring that all visiting groups are given the warmest reception, that all their needs are catered for and that they leave at the end of the night with a strong desire to return.

We must also acknowledge our patrons and sponsors (from the small business that were there for us in 1982 and now no longer exist, to the large corporations such as B.T. who are our sponsors this year) because without their help and support we could not have lasted.

Finally as we look to the future we remember the past and those who are no longer with us. We look at photographs and see their smiles and our memories recall the stories and their enthusiasm and spirit. Their legacy is the Lislea Drama Festival as it is today.

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