Touring Theatre Companies in Tipperary during the Emergency (1939-45)

By Nancy Leahy

In the early hours of an October morning in 1941 fire swept through the Savoy Theatre Tipperary town, leaving in its wake the charred remains of the stage effects and costume hampers of the Louis D'Alton touring Theatre Company. The company simply moved to the Tivoli Theatre in Henry Street and presented the remainder of the programme with the generous assistance of members of local dramatic societies, prominent amongst whom were Tommy Walshe and Tommy Morrissey. At the final curtain of Sean O Casey's *Juno and The Paycock* on Sunday night, Mr. D'Alton warmly thanked all those who had come to his assistance.[1] 'The Show Must Go On' and on they no doubt went to their next venue and coped as strolling players must.

The tradition of the strolling player dates back to 534 BC when according to tradition, Thespis took his players around Greece in a cart. Irish touring thespians do not appear on record until centuries later. The Smock Alley Theatre Company of Essex Quay, Dublin went on tour in the provinces 1713 – 1741.[2] The James Love Company is recorded as having toured in Tralee, Co. Kerry in 1756 with a Shakespearian repertoire.3[1] Reading parties and amateur theatricals were a feature of evening entertainment in the houses of the gentry according to *Retrospections of Dorothea Herbert* 1770-1806.

Robert M. Sillard writes about a performance of *Macbeth* in Clonmel in 1839 in *Barry Sullivan and His Contemporaries*. Towards the end of the nineteenth century Edward Compton and F.R.Benson were touring the Irish 'smalls' (small towns) with their classical repertoires. J.C. Trewin in *Benson and the Bensonians* had the following to say: 'Next to Stratford their Irish tours were the happiest parts of a Benson year . . . In the rural 'smalls' they dared any fit-up stage in schoolrooms or barns. Venturing to hint to a local manager that actors and actresses ought not to share a single dressing-room, Benson received the puzzled reply: And why not, sir? Aren't they friendly?'

The companies who toured Tipperary during The Emergency were therefore continuing the ancient tradition of entertaining those who had no other access to theatre. The contribution made by these companies to the theatre history of Ireland is extremely difficult to evaluate in the absence of documentation. What cannot be questioned is the excitement generated by their arrival into a rural town or village, with their living vans and gaily painted trucks in a pre-television, pre-rural electrification era. The central questions to be explored are: Why did they come? How were they received? What impact did they have? To address these issues, it is necessary to explore the context of the period.

Setting the scene.

Ireland during The Emergency was a politically conservative, economically underdeveloped new state, striving to come to terms with its post-colonial identity in a social climate of state censorship and church repression. The policy of neutrality was seen by almost all citizens as a practical stance dictated by military and political necessities. Civil-War rivalries were swept aside in favour of a new compact: the case of Ireland versus the foreigner.

Into this rareified political atmosphere came the touring theatre companies and travelling shows, many of whom were English and all of whom were warmly welcomed and well supported in times of very scarce disposable income. The poor economic health of the country coupled with the war-time deprivations presented considerable challenges. Houses generally did not have electric light, piped water, bathroom or indoor toilets and the touring companies had to find digs in the town or village where they were performing. The company usually travelled by truck to the new venue. The directions for loading were very specific. Pillars of costume skips were built in each corner of the truck. The flats were laid on top, forming a kind of roof; the company sat in the space between the skips while a tarpaulin was thrown over the top in an attempt to keep the elements at bay. On arrival at the new venue, the men unloaded the truck at the hall while the women of the company went in search of digs. This entailed going from door to door asking householders if they would rent them a room for the duration of the company's stay. The preferred option for touring actors was a rental arrangement which included 'use of the range'. The opportunity of making money by renting rooms was too good to pass up at a time when money was so scarce, regardless of the suitability of the accommodation to the needs of the actors.

Barry Cassin recalls a visit to Cahir, Co. Tipperary with Equity Productions, on an unspecified date during the Emergency. The *Nationalist* records show that Equity Productions performed in the Parochial Hall, Cahir in April 1944 and May 1945. Some company members found rooms to rent from a young couple with a new baby, living in a new council estate in the town. The room allotted to the female actors had one bed and no other furniture of any kind. The men's accommodation was completely bare. Fortunately the company's repertoire included *The Far Off Hills* by Lennox Robinson, the props list for which included beds. The stage beds were brought from the hall and set up in the bare room but had to be dismantled on the relevant night and returned to their rightful place on the set and dismantled again after the show and hauled manually back to the sleeping quarters. Actors' weekly wage, at this time, was three pounds ten shillings which definitely did not allow for staying in a hotel for the week. Neither did it allow for travel costs between venues. The entire company travelled in the hired truck with the costume skips, scenery etc.[4]

Coping with whatever conditions prevailed was central to the survival of the touring companies as is evidenced by the maintenance of the tradition in Tipperary during the Civil War. The *Nationalist* 19 July 1922, records that The Mark Wynne Irish Players were in the Oisin Theatre Clonmel that night presenting *The Boys of Wexford.* News items recorded on the same day included: 'Rail and postal services suspended', 'Burning of Kilmacow Barracks and Fidown Bridge', 'Big Conflagration at Clonmel Military Barracks'. While the chaos and destruction of the Civil War raged The Mark Wynne Players not only finished their week's run but were re-booked for a further three weeks, due to popular demand.

War-time rationing impacted on players, sometimes in unpredictable ways. The sharp fall in the supply of coal from Britain meant that Ireland had to fall back on her local turf supply as the main fuel. In 1941, De Valera announced that if hardships were to be avoided the country must cut an extra three million tons of turf that summer.[5] A direct connection emerges between this directive and touring theatre companies' transport arrangements. The standard practice was to hire a local truck for such transport but at turf cutting time all available trucks were on the bog at first light. The Louis D'Alton Company had to leave for their next venue at four a.m. one Monday morning in 1942 to facilitate the truck driver's contract on the bog.[6]

The fuel shortage, in some ways, actually facilitated the travelling shows. People in rural Ireland were virtually trapped in their own areas, regardless of their socio-economic status. The only means of travel were walking, cycling, horse riding or horse-drawn cart, trap or carriage. Trips outside one's immediate area were few as was the possibility of having visits paid from other areas. Within this context it is easy to understand the excitement generated by the arrival of the touring theatre company or travelling show with all its attendant paraphernalia and extrovert activity. Carl Falb describes the arrival of the Anew McMaster Company as something of a circus parade. 'Mac was well known, his arrival was anticipated, and occasionally he would stride down the main street greeting and waving to the townspeople. Young boys would follow along, hoping to help in the transfer of the lights, scenery and costume hampers into the theatre in exchange for free passes'.[7] The acute need for distraction from the grim realities of the war years must have been well answered by this flamboyant actor-manager and his company. McMaster and his company were often invited to the houses of the local gentry for a drink after the show. The locals wished to show appreciation for the entertainment offered but were also excited to have someone new to talk with which to engage in conversation.[8]

The Vic Loving Variety show, *Flash Parade,* toured extensively in Tipperary from the thirties to the early sixties. Vikki Jackson, granddaughter of the late Vic Loving, remembers afternoons spent 'at tea' in the houses of people who extended this invitation every time the *Flash Parade* came 'to town'. The warmth of the welcome extended to both these companies stands in stark contrast to Sheila Ward's comment on the difficulty sometimes of finding digs in a town: 'Some towns didn't like the players – they thought we were a queer lot'.[9] Sheila Ward toured with the Louis D'Alton Players in 1942. Their itinerary in October of that year included Clonmel, Cashel and Carrick-on-Suir. It is highly unlikely that her comment is based on their reception in Tipperary town given the hospitality shown to the company the previous year when they sustained the loss of their entire effects in the Savoy Theatre fire.

It is also interesting to note that the Abbey Theatre's provincial tour which began in April 1940 sustained a financial loss and appears to have closed before the projected tour was complete.[10] There is no trace of this negativity to be found in the glowing reviews of their reception in Tipperary, as reported in The *Nationalist,* 20 July 1940: "The Abbey Players had an outstanding reception in Tipperary, where they played to well filled houses during their three-night visit. Local people were delighted at the opportunity afforded them of seeing these distinguished artists and the long line of cars outside the theatre each night was evidence of the keen interest which folk living in the rural districts took in their

representations of Irish life". The 'long line of cars' is interesting at a time of severe petrol rationing. It appears that the arrival of the Abbey Theatre Company on its first tour to Tipperary town was considered an event not to be missed even if sacrifices had to be made. The company performed at the Savoy Cinema, Tipperary town on 15, and 17 July and at the Oisin Cinema, Clonmel 18-20 July. The review of the Clonmel performances is equally effusive and opens with the remark that "lack of space prevents us from doing real justice to the performances". The paper had been downsized due to the prevailing paper shortage.

The primary issues affecting the social and cultural context of the Emergency years were the Catholic Church, which was strictly authoritarian, and the 1929 Censorship of Publications Act. Irish Catholic morality was upheld and protected not alone by the censors but also by the Catholic Church, the government and it must be said, many ordinary people. 'Catholic sexual morality and the ideal of the Catholic family were seen as a front line in the battle with the secular materialism of Britain and the United States'.[11] The religious and political leaders were diligently supported in their efforts by a variety of organisations: the corporatist movement, The Legion of Mary, etc. Into this stifling atmosphere of censorship and repression came the touring theatre companies and travelling shows.

Anew McMaster, with his Shakespearian repertoire, was less likely to offend against the status quo than Vic Loving's Flash Parade with its bleached blonde chorus line of pretty females bedecked in self-supporting tops and mid-thigh skirts. 'The slightly risqué nature of some of the costumes made by Vic Loving allowed priests to castigate the show from the altar, referring to the company as 'The Flesh Parade'.[12] Vic Loving, with her Spanish/ Welsh/Jewish/Circus/British Music-Hall background and her stage persona of male impersonator, was not easily intimidated by the authoritarian Catholic Church. In fact she welcomed being denounced from the pulpit since it invariably led to increased box-office takings.[13]

Jimmy O Dea and company, who performed at the Clonmel Theatre in April 1941 and Nov.1945, did not escape unscathed. Albert Daniels, in his book *Five and Nine,* describes an incident in Fermoy where Jimmy O Dea's full-house on opening night was followed by almost empty houses for the rest of the run due to the local clergy taking issue with his material. Annie D'Alton's 'Irish Players' on tour in Roscrea in May 1952 had their production of *A Priest in the Family* banned at the Abbey Hall by a Fr. Duffy who obviously saw it as a threat to Catholic morality. They presented it instead at the Temperance Hall in the same town and had a packed house.[14]

However, protests against the imagined impact of dramatic presentations are not confined to overly zealous clerics. The Vic Loving Company, on tour in Bansha, Co. Tipperary, in the fifties, were made aware of the variety of political persuasions amongst their audiences when an impassioned objection was made against the performance of *The McCormac Brothers,* by a member of the Trant family who lived in the area. The event on which the play is based is fully explored by Nancy Murphy in *Guilty or Innocent? Cormac Brothers – Trial, Execution and Exhumation.* The story-line follows the story of two brothers found guilty of the murder of a land agent named Ellis, employed on the Trant estate at Dovea, Thurles, Co. Tipperary in 1857. Vic Loving was not sufficiently concerned about the sensibilities of one of her patrons to arrange a change of programme. The lack of local

support from any quarter of the community for the objection highlights the declining influence of the Big House in a society which was becoming more confident with its new found independence.

The economic, political, social, and cultural mores of The Emergency period are well documented but does this inform any kind of consensus on the contemporary audiences? First hand accounts from the strolling players themselves of audiences' readiness to get involved in the stage action, suggest a naiveté and simplicity which presumably resulted from their lack of exposure to other forms of entertainment. 'Tony Glass remembers playing the role of Kevin Barry alongside Jimmy McFadden who was playing a British soldier, and who had to beat him up. It was at this point that a woman from the front of the audience mounted the stage and started beating McFadden with her umbrella . . . Teresa Davidson noted that audiences accepted Shakespeare as if it was real life. She remembers playing in *Othello* and her landlady chiding her: "I'm surprised you had anything to do with that fellow".[15] Audience members' interaction with the actors was not always concerned with characterisation. The Clopet-York Company was presenting *White Cargo* at the Town Hall in Tipperary town in the 40s during a particularly cold spell of weather. A snow fall on the night meant an almost empty auditorium. The tropical setting of the play was in stark contrast to the very low temperature in the hall; as an actor observed "It's blasted hot in here" a chilled patron retorted "By J....! You should sit down here for a while".[16]

McMaster recalled in a radio interview, many instances where the audience offered advice on how he should respond to a given situation. During the vault scene in *Romeo and Juliet* as he played the distraught Romeo holding his apparently dead love in his arms, someone helpfully yelled from the audience "Arrah! Give her a good shake". McMaster claims that he was often tempted to take the advice! It was this quality in rural Irish audiences which attracted McMaster and convinced him that their attention to Shakespeare was simply because they had no idea how the play was going to finish. Does this incapacity to distinguish between drama and reality suggest an almost total ignorance of dramatic convention? Or does it suggest desperation to escape from the austere, repressed, censored, impoverished, apprehensive, isolated existence that was theirs to endure on their neutral island which was neither 'in' nor 'out' of the war

"Good my Lord, will you see the players well bestowed"

Why did touring companies come to visit rural halls in such difficult times? They were simply maintaining a well established tradition. Touring the provinces had been an integral part of an actor's work- life since the early eighteenth century. It was not going to change because of war-time conditions. Irish performers could not rely on the theatres of the cities to employ them for more than a few weeks each year. Therefore touring the provinces was an economic necessity if one was to survive within the profession. Yet Anew McMaster claimed the opposite to be the case. He regularly left his company touring while he returned to the city to perform in The Gate, The Gaiety or The Olympia Theatre in Dublin, in order, he claimed, to make enough money to finance his large touring company. One aspect of the actor's life which cannot be disputed is the contrast between his working conditions in city theatres and those which had to be survived as a touring actor.

The acting spaces available in rural villages and small towns during the Emergency years were a far cry from city theatre standards. The touring companies had to attempt to

transform town halls, parochial halls, school halls, court-houses and even barns into theatres; hence the terms ' fit-up' and 'barnstormer'. They came prepared to 'fit-up' the space with all that was necessary for its transformation into an acceptable acting area: props, scenery, costumes, curtains, lighting, flats, the materials for erecting a temporary improvised stage if necessary and a large frame or 'fit-up' which when erected, would facilitate the hanging of scenes and tabs.[17] All this preparatory work of 'fitting-up' was done usually by the male actors on arrival at the venue. Depending on the solvency and size of the company it may have had a few stage crew members for the heavy work.

In the case of Vic Loving's touring variety show all the 'fitting-up' was done by Tilt men. This was the term used for all the non-performing members of the company. In summer she used a performance tent which had to be erected before the acting space could be 'fitted-up'. She regularly employed Tilt men at the performance venue and was known to take them touring with her for the summer season depending on the level of their efficiency and general suitability. This chance of casual labour, at a time of acute unemployment, was yet another reason for the enthusiasm which greeted her arrival at a particular venue. Vic Loving made it very clear in all her financial dealings that she was a woman who always paid her bills at the end of a run. This stance was very necessary because instances of travelling shows fleeing town without paying their bills had occurred in the past and fears of being cheated by 'outsiders' had to be allayed. Further income was generated by rents paid for accommodation and a grass space for the many living vans, trucks, tents etc. of this elaborate company.[18]

The Theatre companies, as opposed to the Variety companies, who toured Tipperary during the Emergency did not travel with performance tents; they performed in local halls, cinemas and theatres. Their performances in cinemas and theatres are covered by the standard cinema adverts in the local papers but performances elsewhere are almost totally undocumented. Thankfully some references to their visits do appear in the local notes columns; usually just a mention that the event took place and a comment about the level of attendances. The *Tipperary Star,* 22 February 1941 reports that Anew McMaster's visit to The Savoy Theatre, Tipperary town the previous week had not been well supported. "It is said that the cause of the poor reception was 'bad publicity'. And it certainly looks like it, as it turns out that there were quite a number of people in town and country who never knew that the show was on at all".

The same paper in December 1926 had the following to say about a production of *Hamlet* by the same company at the same venue – "For an hour or so before the performance began the hall was crowded in every part, and several hundred had to be turned away disappointed". A similar response is reported the following year on his return visit to Tipperary town when he had Michael Mc Liammoir and Hilton Edwards as members of his company. What had caused the change in the intervening years? Was it erosion of cultural tastes in Tipperary town, the prevailing conditions of the Emergency period or poor advertising? A small relatively insignificant advertisement of McMaster's run at the Savoy Theatre, Tipperary town does appear in The *Nationalist* on 18 February 1941. The marked contrast between this sparse style and the expansive resplendent McMaster advertisement in the *Tipperary Star* on 22 October 1927 is worthy of some consideration. Was it over- confidence on the part of the actor-manager or a reflection of the straightened

circumstances of the period? A third possibility could have been the downsizing of the paper due to paper shortage. Whatever the cause the effect was obvious. McMaster did not tour Tipperary town in 1942 and appears to have confined his venue choices to Clonmel and Cahir in 1943 and 1944.

The Lord Longford Company visited the Clonmel Theatre annually from 1942-45 with the exception of 1943 when they appeared in the Castle Cinema, Carrick-on-Suir. Lord and Lady Longford's interview with Mr. Joseph Drohan, manager of the Castle Cinema Company, to secure the fixture, is noted in The *Nationalist* in Sept. 1943. Yet a review of their performances is sadly missing. Their Clonmel runs are however reviewed in *The Nationalist* of 5 January 1944 and 7 March 1945. The title of both reviews reads "Brilliant Players". The performances of Sheridan's *School for Scandal* and Shaw's *The Doctor's Dilemma* in January '44 made a considerable impression. "I have no hesitation at all in declaring them to have been the two best performances in my fairly long experience of the theatre in Clonmel. If one were to judge by their rapt attention and the applause at the final curtain the audience must have felt much the same way as I did". The review of their performances in Cahir Parochial Hall in late April 1945 was equally superlative and included a tribute by a Fr. Synnott to Lord and Lady Longford's contribution as actor managers. "We in small communities like Cahir are far from the capital and The Gate Theatre. We might hear of it giving the cream of acting but little chance we would have of enjoying it there. But Lord and Lady Longford in their generosity have chosen to do that which deeply affects out-of-the-way centres like our own. They have decided to bring drama at its best to our very doors and in that they are helping to train provincial drama to aim high and educate itself up to real excellence". Fr. Synnott is propounding the widely held belief in the inspirational value of good quality stage performances to aspiring actors. The Longford Company's visits to Tipperary town are not recorded except thankfully in the memories of their patrons. They came regularly and played to full houses who fully appreciated the quality of their productions and their repertoire.[19]

Barrs-Morris Productions, a London company, performed at the City Hall, Cashel and the Town Hall, Fethard in April 1940. The 'Fethard Notes' in The *Nationalist* of 13 April 1940 claims as follows: "The Company's repertoire is varied, and the experience and proficiency of the artistes is reflected in the excellent manner in which they put over the best of modern plays. Their selection varies from light comedy to stark tragedy, so that all tastes are catered for". A very comprehensive advertisement appears in The *Nationalist* on 8 April showing the two leading members of the Company: Miss Barbara Ogilvie and Mr. Colin Morris. A replica of Miss Ogilvie's photograph appears in the *Tipperary Star* six months later on 12 October. The caption reads: 'Barbara Ogilvie, member of the Comedie Fracaise, who plays with the Anew McMaster Company in Thurles next week'. This nicely illustrates the fragile tenure of touring company membership and highlights the transient reality of an actor's work-life.

The Clopet-York Company toured regularly in the area from 1940-1944, appearing in Clonmel, Tipperary, Cashel and Thurles. While the company name sounds English the members of the cast, as listed in The *Nationalist* on 29 April 1942, are mainly Irish-sounding. "Miss Diana Romney, one of the best actresses in the country, who also had a great measure of success in London and New York; Malachi Keegan who was for many

years with the Abbey Theatre and toured America with this famous company; Sheila Maguire, who was also with the Abbey before joining Clopet Productions two years ago; Patricia Burgess, Cecil McCracken, Edith Lemass, Kevin Young etc". Their repertoire had an international rather than an Irish flavour: *White Cargo* by Noel Gordon, *Spring Tide* by J.B. Priestly, G.B. Shaw's *Pygmalion*, Patrick Hamilton's *Gas Light*, Emily Bronte's classic *Wuthering Heights,* Eugene O'Neill's powerful drama *Anna Christie,* Emlyn Williams' *Night Must Fall,* Noel Coward's comedy *Hay Fever* etc. Their billing describes them as presenting 'high-class' plays; their advance notices welcome this 'famous' or 'celebrated' company; the only review, which appeared in the *Nationalist* on 4 November 1944, is somewhat more tame. It describes the performance of *Gas Light* as 'good' and the acting as 'capable'. Effusive superlatives are noticeably absent but must we not always make allowances for the mood of the reviewer on a given night?

The touring Variety Shows may be viewed as the Irish equivalent to British Music Hall and American Vaudeville. Their traditional programme consisted of three one-hour long sections: Variety, Melodrama and 'Laughable Farce'. The all important raffle tickets were sold in the first interval after the variety performance and the draw was made after the melodrama. The 'laughable farce' normally concluded the night's entertainment but some companies were known to clear the floor and call on their pianist or accordionist to supply the music for a dance lest their patrons needed further entertainment after a three-hour show! The companies who strictly adhered to this format even into the forties and fifties performed mainly in village halls and performance tents and their visits were rarely recorded in local papers. This gap in our theatre history is sometimes bridged by parish journals and newsletters. The *Fethard/Killusty Newsletter* 1991 records the following memory: '. . .Fethard and other towns like it were well catered for with road shows. McCormack's Variety show and Mullins Show would both set up their tent on The Green . . The shows consisted of one hour of film and forty-five minutes of variety. I remember the wind taking part of the canvas away one night, but still the show went on . . . The Town Hall was also the venue for many a good variety show. They would arrive unannounced and set up stage. They parked their lovely bright caravans outside the Town Hall and this created an air of excitement and expectation . . . Harry Lynton, Vic Loving, Dusky Dan, The Shannon Players, McFaddens, Anew McMaster, Courtneys and Jack Doyle the boxer's show'. A more comprehensive list of travelling shows can be accessed from the following publications: *Gags and Greasepaint* by Vikki Jackson, *Louis D'Alton and the Abbey Theatre* by Ciara O'Farrell, *The Lost Theatres of Dublin* by Philip B. Ryan.

The Variety Companies whose performances were advertised in the local papers were mainly those who had a well established profile in the city theatres: Jimmy O'Dea and Company, Frank O'Donovan, Macks Music Hall, Harry Bailey, Jim Jonson, Jack Doyle and Movita, Edgar Benyon. Their status as regulars at the Theatre Royal, Gaiety or Olympia Theatres in Dublin did not unfortunately ensure a review of their Tipperary tours in the *Nationalist* or *Tipperary Star.* Interestingly, the only two who merited a review were the magician Edgar Benyon and the pantomime specialist Jim Jonson. The review of Jonson's Clonmel performance in The *Nationalist* on 5 June 1943 concludes with a strong recommendation to the readers "to visit this unpretentious but excellent show". Is there perhaps a suggestion here that the show could be improved by having somewhat more 'pretension?' Jonson is described as a 'popular comedian' and his show is said to be 'a

good bright show with many amusing little sketches slickly put over, clever dancing, fine violin playing and pleasant singing'. Was this somewhat lack lustre review responsible for Jonson's decision to avoid Clonmel on his future Tipperary tours? Whatever the reason, he did not return to Clonmel but confined his appearances to The Excel Cinema, Tipperary town in April and June 1943, April 1944 and March 1945. No review can be found to establish Tipperary town's response to this well established performer.

Edgar Benyon's show *Bam-Boo-Zalem* is advertised and reviewed in the *Nationalist* 22 April 1942; the Company were performing at The Clonmel Theatre. The advertisement is so outrageously eye-catching a crowded auditorium must have been guaranteed! The review neither confirms nor denies my supposition but is loud in its praise for the actor-manager and his company. "There is no doubt about it: Benyon is an amazing performer. He is as good a magician as we have ever seen anywhere, an excellent ventriloquist, a good juggler, a master of the art of quick-change, and several other things as well. Added to this, he has an engaging personality and puts over his stuff with rare slickness. This time, too, his Company is much better than its predecessor, including as it does several items of first-rate quality". There is no record of a return visit. The lack of newspaper advertisements, I have learned, does not preclude the possibility that further visits were in fact made. Touring companies appear to have relied mainly on poster advertising; the cost of newspaper adverts may have been prohibitive.

"The best in this kind are but shadows"

The world of fit-up theatre is dead. Its place in the history of Irish theatre is largely undocumented in spite of its popularity and its long tradition. The companies that elected to spend the years of the Emergency entertaining rural Irish audiences survived in a period of extremely challenging economic, political and social conditions. Yet "the show went on" and a lifestyle was maintained against the odds. Their resilience, tenacity and survival instincts are above question. The standards achieved in their performances are hard to establish in the absence of critical evaluation but the excitement generated by their arrival and the enthusiasm of the reception afforded them is sufficient evidence of their importance in the story of Irish theatre. They answered a need at a given time and when that need died the era of touring theatre companies and travelling shows came to an end.

Maybe the caravans no longer rolled; maybe the costume skips consigned themselves to the theatrical junk-pile; maybe tilt men did not need to erect tents anymore but the tradition continued albeit through a different medium. Teilifís Eireann, the republic of Ireland's indigenous television service began on 31 Dec. 1961. It was renamed Radio Telefis Eireann in 1966 after it merged with Radio Eireann. The spread of television may have been the final blow to the touring tradition but it also extended a life-line to some of the acting fraternity. Their work spaces simply changed from country halls to TV studios.

RTE productions were thickly populated by touring actors of long standing. The character of Stephen Brennan in *Glenroe* was played by Robert Carrickford whose family had been in the touring theatre business as the J.B. Carrickford Company since 1830.[21] Annie D'Alton, whose theatre company was mentioned earlier, played Minnie Brennan in *The Riordans;* Frank Donovan, who toured extensively in Tipperary during the Emergency with his variety show, played Batty Brennan in the same show; while Tom Cowley who had also had his own touring company played Tom Riordan. Anna Manahan, a former member

of Equity Productions, starred in a long line of RTE productions: *The Irish RM, Fair City* etc. Cyril Cusack began his acting career as a young boy with The O'Brien and Ireland touring company. The remainder of his illustrious career speaks for itself and included very many TV appearances. Denis Franks, who became famous as the thorn in the side of Ulick O'Connor on *'The Late Late Show',* had toured with The McFadden Company.

Jimmy O'Dea and Company combined touring with their well established tenure at The Gaiety and The Olympia theatres, appearing at Clonmel Theatre in April 1941 and November 1945 and at many other unrecorded venues. When provincial tours were no longer viable he adopted the medium of television as an alternative source of work and gained an audience there as easily as he had done on stage and screen. The proportion of the entire touring fraternity who found employment in RTE following the demise of the tradition was nonetheless miniscule. However, the legacy of the touring tradition is indelibly written into the history of theatre, film and television regardless of the lack of documentation.

War time conditions appear to have offered the required impetus for the growth of regional drama groups. Their proliferation at this period is remarkable. Communities undermined by unemployment, emigration, censorship, repression, isolation etc. somehow found the resolve to take charge of their own entertainment needs. Was their very isolation a root cause of this response? The main contribution of the touring theatre companies at this bleak time was the assurance their arrival gave of the actual existence of an 'outside world'; a world which seemed impervious to war time restrictions. Touring companies only came for one week in the year; the local drama group offered involvement to its members for the entire period of rehearsal and performance. If the intention was to engage with serious drama to express one's disillusion and disappointment with the New Ireland one had a selection of Irish writing to choose from. Patrick Kavanagh's classic Irish anti-pastoral *The Great Hunger,* published in 1942, paints a bleakly critical picture of the lonely life of the archetypal, middle-aged, unmarried farmer in a matriarchal impoverished society.

Yet the challenge to dramatise this long poem was not taken up until the 1980's, when Tom MacIntyre in collaboration with actor Tom Hickey and director Patrick Mason staged it at the Peacock. Writers such as George Shiels, Louis D'Alton and MJ Molloy provided scripts which proved very popular with local drama groups who appeared more concerned with entertainment of a somewhat lighter genre. Though it is fair to note that Shiels, D'Alton and Molloy did explore themes on living conditions in Free State Ireland but mainly within the comedic framework. The *Tipperary Star* records on 24 February 1945 that on the following Sunday night at Hollyford, Upperchurch and Rearcross the following comedies would be presented: *The Proposal, The Man From Mannarue, The Courting of Mary Doyle.* Alongside this levity in North Tipperary the Cappawhite drama patrons were entertained to *The Dawn of Freedom* by J. Malachi Muldoon "a thrilling drama of the sad but glorious insurrection of '98. Performed in full costume and military equipment of this period".

The possible influence exerted on the amateur drama movement by touring theatre companies cannot be ignored. In spite of the variety of standards achieved by the various companies surviving in almost impossible circumstances it is to be presumed that aspiring actors were inevitably affected by the unique magic of live theatre. No text book, workshop or drama school, however inventive, can hope to generate the energy of a live performance.

Consider the heightened impact of playing to an audience surviving the desolate conditions of the Emergency; they must have been the most receptive audience imaginable. The connection established at this period followed through to the following decade when the Drama League of Ireland was formed with the object of developing the amateur drama movement by organising annually All Ireland Drama Festivals. Adjudicators for the nationwide festivals were selected from the various theatre companies. The introduction of competition gave rise to the need for the formation of the Amateur Drama League whose object was to provide workshops and courses in all aspects of theatre for its members; teachers of the craft were naturally drawn from the ranks of the acting fraternity. The almost inevitable cross-over from amateur to professional became a reality for the exceptionally talented.

The legacy of the touring tradition is considerable; that it merits further investigation is undeniable.

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4. Barry Cassin Interview June 2007.
5. Wills, p 238.
6. Ciara O'Farrell, *Louis D'Alton and the Abbey Theatr*e (Dublin 2004), p. 36.
7. Falb, p. 22.
8. Falb, p. 186.
9. O'Farrell, p. 36.
10. O'Farrell, p. 128.
11. Wills, p. 25.
12. O'Farrell, p. 59.
13. Jackson Interview.
14. O'Farrell, p.60.
15. O'Farrell, p.56.
16. Interview: Jackie Hayes, Tipperary Town, Dec. 21st 2009.
17. O'Farrell, p. 35.
18. Jackson Interview.
19. Hayes Interview.
20. P.B. Ryan, *The Lost Theatres of Dublin* (Badger Press 1998), p.66.
21. Ryan, p. 64.

Note: The writer would be very glad to hear from anybody who is interested in this topic or has memories to share.