



The Corn Exchange

In its 150-year plus life, the Palace Theatre, under several names, has witnessed almost every kind of entertainment. Stars of the 19th and early 20th century musical hall and variety theatre circuit including conjurors, dancers, singers, comedians and animal acts have played here, as well as lecturers, drama companies and musical societies. Many leading stars of their day like Will Fyffe, Duncan Macrae, Rikki Fulton, Lex McLean, Chic Murray, Val Doonican, Billy Connolly and many others have performed at the Palace, often at the beginning of their long careers.

The Palace has also been home to several local musical and dramatic societies over many years. By showcasing local talent and maintaining the support of audiences for first-class productions they have undoubtedly contributed to the theatre's survival.

The Palace Theatre has its origins in the Corn Exchange, which opened on 16th September 1863 as Kilmarnock's principal place of business for farmers and merchants. It was designed in an elaborate Italianate style by Kilmarnock-born architect James Ingram (1799-1879). The facade is dominated by the 110-foot-tall clock tower named in honour of Prince Albert, the Prince Consort, who had died in 1861. The tower was paid for by a public subscription of £600 and the clock was made by John Cameron, jeweller and watchmaker of King Street. The sculpted heads over the main entrance represent Prince Albert, Sir James Shaw (Kilmarnock-born Lord Mayor of London), and Lord Clyde (a Scottish hero of the Crimean War and Indian Mutiny).

The ground floor facing Green Street contained an arcade of shops, and had the public library on the upper floor. The upper floor facing London Road contained the Athenaeum reading room. The total cost was just over £6,000. The opening was marked by two performances by the Kilmarnock Philharmonic Society of Handel's oratorio *Judas Maccabaeus*. Other events to mark the occasion were a ball for 200 persons and a celebration dinner for 350.

From the beginning the Corn Exchange was intended to be a place of entertainment as well as business and it was available for concerts, bazaars, political meetings and other activities. The main hall could accommodate 1200 persons and a pipe organ occupied one end. An early entertainment was a programme of Friday concerts which would '*... supply healthy and innocent amusement for the people ... as a shelter from the snares to vicious indulgence*'.

Variety Theatre

In 1885-6 the Corn Exchange was extended by R.S. Ingram (son of the original architect) to create an art gallery and a link to the then Agricultural Hall. By the beginning of the 20th century new ways of conducting business had rendered the Corn Exchange redundant. Part of the interior was then converted to a theatre with the name Corn Exchange Hall. The Agricultural Hall became the Grand Hall. By the beginning of the 20th century the Corn Exchange was wholly given over to entertainment and was presenting a wide variety of attractions. In 1900 for instance there were among others Mr Alexander Jolly, an Evangelist of the Catholic Apostolic Church, who presented *Addresses on the Instant Appearance of the Lord*; an orchestral concert offered seats from sixpence to three shillings; the Kilmarnock Choral Society presented *The Creation*; *The Lady Slavey* was a 'go-as-you-please Pantomimical Musical Piece'; a Miss Thompson delivered *An Address to Ladies* (tickets sixpence and a shilling); and The Rt Hon the Earl of Rosslyn delivered *Twice Captured*, a talk about his adventures in the Boer War. To close the year the famous Ben Greet Company came to Kilmarnock to present four plays including *East Lynne* and *The Belle of New York*.

Other attractions before the First World War included many top stars of the day including Little Tich, Fred Karno's Kompany of Komedians (which may have included the yet-to-be-famous Charlie Chaplin), Georg Hackenschmidt (world-famous strong man and wrestler), Florrie Forde, and Harry Lauder.

By 1908, now known as the Palace Theatre of Varieties, the theatre was presenting acts such as The Ormsby Quartette; Harry Wright, 'Comedian and Extempore Vocalist'; Halma, the Scottish Society Juggler; and Nellie Gannon – 'Kilmarnock's Favourite Chorus Singer'. In 1919 acts included The Girttons – 'Cycling College Girls'; George Kirkland, 'the Blind Conjuror'; and Miss Jessie Graham – 'Scottish Contralto Vocalist'

Palace Picture House

The first films were shown at the Corn Exchange as early as 1897 and by 1911 they were a regular part of the programme. The early films were little more than short novelties between stage acts. 'Animated pictures' of the King's visit to Paris was an example. As with theatres elsewhere in the early days of cinema, it was common practice for some time to mix films with live stage acts. In December 1919, for instance, *Betsy's Burglar*, an episode in a film serial starring Harry Houdini, shared the billing with Dave Godfrey, 'the Famous Comedy Magician', and Duncan McTavish and Bernard Hill – 'The Scotsman and the Coloured Acquaintance'.

On one occasion the promoter misguidedly staged a performance of the same story the evening after showing the film *Daddy Long Legs* starring Mary Pickford. Perhaps the advertisements were misleading, for the audience believed they were coming to see America's Sweetheart repeat her role in person . . . on the stage . . . in Kilmarnock. When this proved not to be the case their disappointment was immediate, vocal and violent! The disturbance was quelled only when a senior police officer in the audience stood on his seat and shouted down the noisy crowd. The promoter did not repeat the experiment.

By the 1930s, the Palace was exclusively a cinema with the name Palace Picture House. A state-of-the-art sound system was installed for the new 'talkies' – a recording of the film soundtrack was played on a gramophone synchronised with the projector.

After the war the Palace Picture House could not compete with more modern and more comfortable cinemas in the town such as the Regal and the Plaza and it closed in 1949. It seemed its time as a place of entertainment had ended.

Exchange Theatre

The Palace lay empty until a gift of £5,000 towards its refurbishment prompted the Council to spend a further £30,000. In 1951 it was reborn as the 625-seater Exchange Theatre. Mr Kurt Lewenhak was appointed manager at a salary of £650.

The Exchange was intended to be a civic theatre, with programmes featuring local talent. Early shows included the Kilmarnock Amateur Opera Society's production of *Rio Rita*, the Saxone Dramatic Club's production of Allan Ramsay's 1725 play *The Gentle Shepherd*, Kilmarnock Combined Dramatic Clubs' production of *Dear Brutus*, and Henry Cotton's Golf Show.

The first major production was a variety show, *Merry-go-Round* – 'the show with a swing to it' – which opened on 20th June and ran for eight weeks with regular changes of content. Molly Urquhart topped the bill. Seat prices ranged from one shilling (5p) to four and sixpence (22½p). Despite an opening night attended by local dignitaries including William Ross MP, the show was not a success, with most houses being only one-third full. The budget of £9,000 for the season was swiftly exceeded and the theatre was losing an average of £372 a week. Discussing the situation at a special meeting of the Council, and noting the lack of public support, one member remarked 'This is not the first occasion on which the Kilmarnock people have let the Town Council down . . . it would take the Angel Gabriel himself to please a Kilmarnock public.' *Merry-go-Round* staggered to its inglorious end.

Better received were the Scottish Theatre Guild productions of *See How They Run* and two other plays with the rising star Rikki Fulton. A production of *Night Must Fall* featured the young Roddy McMillan of the Citizens' Theatre. Kilmarnock Dramatic Club followed with the comedy *Bunty Pulls the Strings*.

Another variety show was staged: 'an up to the minute topical show, full of Punch, Pep and Personality'. It was called *Come to the Show* but the public largely ignored the invitation. The theatre manager tendered his resignation and left at the end of the year. At the end of 1951 the *Kilmarnock Standard* summed up the experiment: '. . . the people of Kilmarnock did not fully support the project just as they did not give a great deal of their time to watching the season of repertory . . . Consequently they have been rated for showing no civic conscience, for being hard to please and for having no cultural interests'.

The 'Fifties

1952 saw more variety shows such as *Laughter Parade*, *Variety Express*, and *Jimmy Logan Discoveries*. The Fraser Neil Players staged the dramas *Pick-up Girl* and *Cosh Boy*, advertised 'for adults only' – and played to full houses.

In 1953, Palace audiences saw among other shows *Private Mackay of the HLI* – 'full of song, dance, rhythm and Khaki Kapers'; *Yuletide Revels*; *Blethers and Barney*; *Hollywood Calling*; and a variety bill with the Four Kentones and Gloria's Educated Dogs. Radio stars Bob and Alf Pearson appeared in *Smile Awhile*, supported by Chic Murray and Maidie. The 1953 pantomime was *Dick Whittington and His Cat* starring Renee Houston, with Chic Murray as Idle Jack. At the end of 1953 a new lessee, William Cummings, took over. His father had managed the theatre many years before and one of the first changes he made was to revive the Palace name. The first production was *The Middle Watch* by Kilmarnock Dramatic Club.

Variety shows continued to be produced and in February 1954 The Four Ramblers – ‘Ireland’s Ambassadors of Song’ – played a week. Future TV and recording star Val Doonican was a member of the group.

One notable success of 1954 was a sixteen-week season of repertory by the Antony Carleon Player, who presented *Blithe Spirit*, *Pygmalion*, *The Happiest Days of Your Life* and others favourites. Summing it up the *Kilmarnock Standard* recorded ‘an eminently successful season’. But there was one night when the box office took only £5.

The lessee maintained that one obstacle to the success of the Palace was that it was the only theatre in Scotland without a bar. The Council was strongly opposed to this but later granted him permission to sell cigarettes, ices, soft drinks and confectionery.

From the mid 1950s until 1979 the theatre was run by co-ordinated voluntary groups by presenting their own shows and booking professional performers, including many well-known stars.

The Palace today

In 1979 the theatre was severely damaged by a fire started by vandals. After repairs costing £190,000 it re-opened on 4th September 1982 with a variety show for charity starring Johnny Beattie, Joe Gordon and Sally Logan.

After further improvements the Palace was formally re-opened on 31st August 1985 by Billy Connolly, who had performed there several times. Noting the latest stage in its refurbishment he commented, ‘I love the way you change the theatre every time I come here. I’ve never seen this place the same twice!’

Over the last few decades the Palace has staged productions by Wildcat Theatre Company, 7.84 Theatre Company, Byre Theatre Company, Perth Theatre Company, Scottish Opera, Scottish Ballet, one-act play festivals, drama festivals and many other attractions. It has also presented many stars of stage and television, including Honor Blackman, Dorothy Paul, Ray Allan and Lord Charles, Alan Price, Mary O’Hara Foster and Allan, Una McLean, and Ardal O’Hanlon,

Today the Palace is a busy 500-seat theatre managed by East Ayrshire Leisure Trust offering a wide variety of shows all through the year, presenting professional performers in one-off appearances or as part of national tours. It is still home to several local societies and the annual pantomime is always eagerly awaited.

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