

BARRY'S HIPPODROME, THE GAIETY, RITZ, LYRIC, PARK, ROXY...AISLING GHEAL & CINEPLEX— LEITRIM'S GALAXY OF CINEMAS

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ACCORDING TO a 1929 *Leitrim Observer* article, Carrick-on-Shannon's first Talking Pictures were to be shown in 'Barry's Hippodrome' situated in Dolan's Field, (where Shannon Lodge and the new Courthouse and Garda Station now stand) on 24th and 25th September of that year. If this is true, Leitrim was indeed at the forefront of movie exhibition at the time, as the first 'talkie', Al Jolson in *The Singing Fool*, only opened in Dublin's Capitol Cinema in the previous April, and it broke all previous box office records. Silent (and later sound) films were shown in Carrick's Town Hall in the late 1920s and early 30s. The Gaiety Cinema, Carrick opened around 1933 and lasted until 2004. The Ritz Cinema, Mohill, The Lyric Cinema, Ballinamore and The Park Cinema, Manorhamilton all opened in the 1940s.

We don't know who was first to bring the movies to Drumshanbo—probably one of the travelling fit-up companies which toured Mooney's (later Doherty's) Hall or St Brigid's Hall (above the old Market Yard), but we do know that the late Ned McGowan regularly had his 'Breffni Cinemas' slot in Doherty's Hall in the 1940s. Ned, quite inventively, used the stage as a balcony, where higher admission prices could be charged. He had constructed his projection room behind the rear wall of the stage, and erected a screen at the other



■ Carrick-on-Shannon Cineplex, opened in 2006

end of the hall, so the patrons had their backs to the stage and were seated facing back-to-front for film shows!

Ned McKiernan from Cavan also visited Drumshanbo on his 'Provincial Cinemas' circuit (which also included Arva, Carrigallen and the Town Hall in Cavan). This all changed, however, in Drumshanbo when Michael John Giblin returned from the US and opened the purpose-built Roxy Cinema on the Carrick Road in 1953. Called after one of the largest Movie Theatres in New York, (the 6,000 seat Roxy "Cathedral of the Movies" just off Times Square) Drumshanbo's 200-seater opened with the Technicolour Western *Where the River Bends*, starring James Stewart and Rock Hudson—a very apt opening movie considering the geographical location of the Roxy beside the bend in the river which runs through Drumshanbo. Initially showing

films every Sunday, the demand was such that Wednesday night movies were soon added, followed by Fridays, and of course well-attended matinees and evening performances on all Church Holidays!

Despite its relatively small size and the then prevalent, but anti-competitive 'barring' system which limited smaller sites access to new film product until nearby cinemas in larger towns had finished their runs, Michael John supplied the cinemagoers of Drumshanbo and surrounding areas with an extraordinary range of movie magic, from the ever-popular western classics *High Noon*, *Shane* and *The Magnificent Seven* to *Citizen Kane*; Oscar-winners such as *From Here to Eternity*, *Marty*, *Two Women* and *The Bridge On The River Kwai*; movies of special Irish and local interest like *The Dawn* and *The Quiet Man*; *The Nun's Story*, and *The Trapp Family* (which later

became the basis for *The Sound of Music*).

Sunday April 30th, 1967, was a sad day, as *The Roxy* closed unceremoniously with a minor Dean Martin comedy, *Who's Got the Action?*, just fourteen years after its opening in the year of the first *An Tostal*, 1953. Thankfully, *An Tostal* has survived, and while the old *Roxy* building itself survived another quarter century in various employment-giving guises such as an ESB pole-store, a frozen food factory and a knitwear factory, it was eventually demolished in 2004 to make way for shops, offices and apartments.

Another Drumshanbo movie entrepreneur was the late Dermot Grey, who ran a mobile cinema in local halls such as Ballinaglera, Dowra and Doobally. In those pre-rural electrification days, many such venues had no electricity, so Dermot had to draw a mobile generator behind his car to "power the pictures"!

Aisling Gheal Liatroma—the Leitrim Mobile Cinema—was a 100-seater fully equipped cinema, with top-of-the-range projection and Dolby stereo sound, which folded into a 13-metre long semi-trailer for transport between venues. The concept arose from a visit by a similar French Cinemobile which toured some villages in the Border Region in 1996 as a cross-border Peace and Reconciliation project. Leitrim County Council invited the Cinemobile to Kiltyclogher, the Leitrim Village on the border with Fermanagh which had suffered most during the Northern troubles. The Council saw the potential for the use of such a mobile facility to help



■ Seating array in the Carrick-on-Shannon Cineplex

rejuvenate other towns and villages in the County, and submitted a proposal in a 1999 competition organised by the Dept of the Environment to celebrate the centenary of Irish Local Government. The Council's entry for a multi-purpose mobile cinema which could also be used for meetings and audio-visual displays etc, won the first prize of £500,000 and was described by the then Minister as "an expression of the new face of Local Government".

The mobile cinema commenced county-wide operation in Drumshanbo in June 2001. Piloted by Joe Quinn or Tommy Aherne, it made weekly visits to Ballinamore, Mohill and Manorhamilton, with less frequent visits to smaller villages. When Carrick-on-Shannon's Gaiety Cinema closed in 2004, Aisling Gheal's remit was extended to the County Capital also. Unfortunately, funding for this valuable resource had to be reduced as the recession started to bite, and the machine was eventually disposed of to Sligo County Council and was rebranded as 'Cinema North-West'.

In the early Summer of 2006, a mysterious ad. appeared in the

Leitrim Observer, headed "Wanna Be In The Movies?" It sought applications from those interested in becoming the Manager and Assistant Manager of a brand new multi-screen cinema in Carrick-on-Shannon with wall-to-wall Panoramic Screens, Super-Surround Stereophonic Sound and extremely luxurious reclining seats. In order not to discourage aspiring Mickey Rooneys and Judy Garlands, it invited those who felt they were not yet ready to play a starring role, to apply to the 'Casting Director' (with a Drumshanbo rather than Hollywood address) for jobs as extras, where they might be initially trained in retail, ushering and other customer services!

Carrick Cineplex opened in October 2006, and while it is not strictly geographically situated in Co Leitrim, it can be regarded as part of 'Greater Carrick-on-Shannon'. It entertains all of South Leitrim and North Roscommon. Run by a Company called 'Cineplex Paradiso Ltd', (guess where did that title come from?), it was registered in the mid-Leitrim town which once was home to the long-lamented *Roxy*!