



John McGivern

William Trevor's short story 'Ballroom of Romance' was read by comparatively few. When it was turned into a play and televised on R.T.E. it had an extraordinary impact. The critics praised it and saw in it the image of the narrow desperate rural life of the 1950s. Bachelors gloomy in their drinking and hopeless spinsters. City dwellers were captivated; for many of them no longer in contact with their roots it was even now the Ireland outside the new Pale. For the rest it was gently and engagingly nostalgic — it was part of our roots, so recent yet so remote.

John McGivern of Glenfarne, the man who built and owned and ran the Ballroom of Romance, what did he think? He sits you down and quietly retells the story of it in that tidy style of his. The Ballroom of Romance was in Glenfarne even if they shot the television film in Ballycroy, Co. Mayo, and in Knockmoylan Hall.

John was born in Brockagh, Glenfarne, and went to America at the age of seventeen during the hungry thirties. He got an "insignificant job" in New York but at least it was a job. He never intended to stay in the United States, he just wanted to make a few dollars and come

♪ Are You Lonesome Tonight? ♪

John McGivern's Romantic Interlude

IN

The Ballroom of Romance



back. He did go to night school and learned public speaking and presentation, a training which eventually he put to good use.

John's ambition was to start a dancehall in Glenfarne, and he did. He returned to Ireland and opened the 'tin shed', as he calls it, at the cross in Glenfarne in 1953. Entry was one shilling (5p). His problem was that the people came to the hall all right but they didn't dance. The boys sat or stood along one side or at the lower end and girls sat on the other side and under the stage. Very few couples actually danced, only those who were 'going steady'. Gradually the patrons began to say 'the dances in Glenfarne are no good', as if it was the fault of someone else, and they began to drift away. John used to lie awake at night wrestling with the problem — how to get partners out on the floor. He knew that once they started to dance they would stay dancing.

He struck on the idea of a 'Romantic Interlude'; here is where his training in public speaking could be used. He advertised far and wide one night in 1955 as the night for the first Romantic Interlude — he distributed five thousand leaflets. There was a good crowd on that night, mostly seated as usual. John had dressed for the occasion, dress suit, bow tie, and he took the stage name Johnny Macaroni. He stepped forward at 11 o'clock (so early!) and said: "Every man must find a partner for the next dance; any man without a partner will be very unpopular, he may even be asked to leave". The band played and John sang the first of his romantic songs, 'Have You Ever Been Lonely' and the people got out and danced. John's gimmick had paid off. Glenfarne Hall had been saved and it became the Ballroom of Romance.

The big bands could come now for John was able to pay them. Entry moved up to half a crown, to five shillings, to ten shillings. The Melody Aces came, The

Clipper Carlton, Big Tom and the Mainliners (Big Tom never forgot the fact that his first big break was in Glenfarne), The Royal Showband, Johnny Flynn, Mick Delahunty, The Skyrockets.

John felt that relations with some of the Church authorities were always strained. Priests went into Court in the early days and objected to the granting of a dance licence. Those were the days when the Church law in Kilmore Diocese decreed that dances had to end at midnight. Not indeed that he had much need to fear the Church, for even then those who felt like breaking the Church law would do so no matter what it decreed. Actually John had three Romantic Interludes each night, the first a 'getting-to-know-you' dance, the second for a kiss and a cuddle, and the third for a proposal of marriage if the man felt so inclined. The whole thing was the gimmick of a good businessman, although John insists that many marriages were 'made' in Glenfarne. He likes to tell the story of the lady in Sligo who blocked off the footpath to him with her pram, pointed to the child in it and announced in mock anger, "That was your fault". Also of the Redemptorist Mission in Glenfarne. The

missioner made some reference on the first night to the moral dangers associated with the dancing scene. John smelled danger so he went around to the sacristy after the sermon and invited the Redemptorist to come to the next dance in the Ballroom of Romance. He came. John put on his best performance that night in the first of his Romantic Interludes. The people kept their eye on the missionary. He advanced to the stage, shook John's hand: "You are doing a good job. More of that and we'd have less trouble with the bachelors and old maids of Ireland in the confessional". Two up for John.

The dance scenes in the television film were shot in Knockmoylan Hall, Co. Mayo. This hall has been closed for many years. Tourists throng there now and chip away the plaster as souvenirs. Not so the real Ballroom of Romance of William Trevor's short story, which was Glenfarne. Now under parish management, it still attracts the crowds and the big bands. And Fr. Fintan McKiernan would not, I am sure, be at all pleased should souvenir hunters attempt to chip away parts of his newly reconstructed 'Rainbow Centre' once again subtitled 'Ballroom of Romance'.



"Getting to Know You" in the Ballroom of Romance.