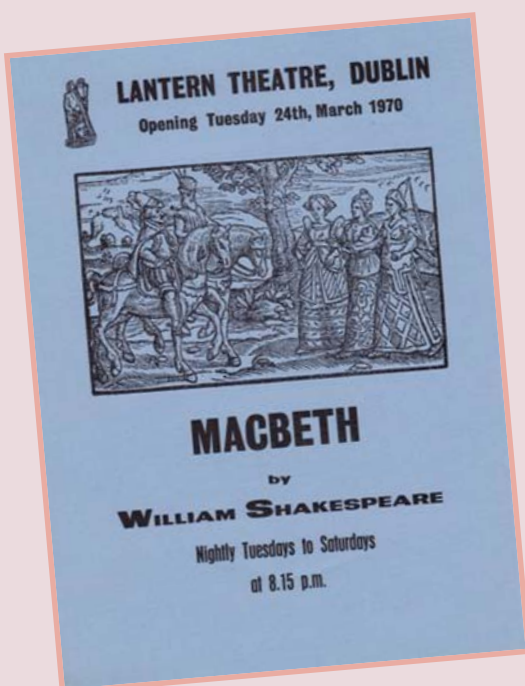


The Lantern on the Square



By Josephine Funge

The recent restoration of the lantern outside No. 38 prompted an investigation into the history of the lantern and led, through a circuitous route, to Josephine Funge, whose late husband Patrick was the main founder of the Lantern Theatre. Josephine has very clear memories of the lantern as it was during the Theatre's sojourn in the basement of No. 38. Interestingly, the lantern structure and scroll work pre-dates the Theatre and we suspect that the structure dates back to when the building was built. There may have been a lantern there originally but the lantern which has just been restored was the one which the Theatre Company installed.



The Lantern Theatre was first founded in 1957 by a small group of people who wanted to do more work in the theatre than just one or two plays a year. The main person behind the group was my late husband Patrick (Pat) Funge. Our first home was in the basement of 127 Baggot Street and the name *The Lantern Theatre* was suggested by Desmond Dempsey without any great significance and, as nobody else came up with anything better, it was just accepted.

We were there until about 1962 when the landlord had other uses for the basement, so we moved to Mount Street Upper where we only stayed for about a year. It was not a very comfortable or successful place so we were always on the look out for an alternative space and we were very lucky to find a basement at 38 Merrion Square.

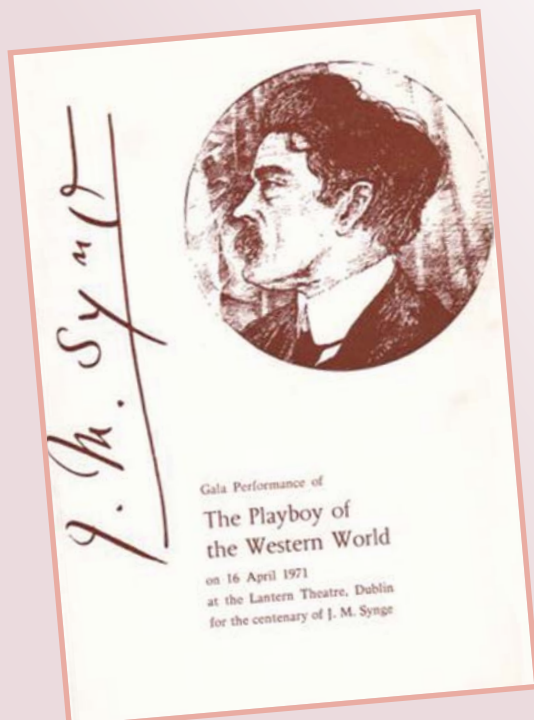
By happenchance there was a lovely structure outside the building which looked as if it had been made for a Lantern and probably in an earlier age was used as such. Pat and Liam Millar, who had joined us in Baggot Street as a designer, got together and decided that a lantern would put a lovely gloss to the building and be a great landmark for the theatre, which, at this time, had quite a large number of loyal followers who would appreciate it. The lantern was lit every evening, summer and winter, when we were playing or rehearsing, and was a lovely sight when one entered the Square, and indeed for a number of years after the theatre had

closed was kept lit by the new residents of the basement. It had at this point become part of the street furniture of the Square and we were thrilled to see that Waterstones used a photo of the lantern on the cover of their Christmas Book List. However, I don't remember what year that was.

Our years in Merrion Square were very happy and very successful. J.J. Finnegan in the *Evening Herald* said an opening night at the Lantern was always an occasion and many times the opening was a Premiere. Audiences came back again and again and included such luminaries as Lord and Lady Longford, Michael Mac Liammoir and Hilton Edwards as well as a coterie of writers and poets whose work was performed there.

The major critics from all the Dublin papers attended our opening nights and our summer seasons saw visitors from all over the world and, as we always did shows with an Irish flavour, foreign visitors were eager to sample some of the home brew! Many of the visitors returned any time they were in the country and the *New York Times* described us as being "The most rewarding theatre in Dublin" (August 1964). We also had a review in a Scandinavian paper which unfortunately I don't have to hand.

Merrion Square saw some of our most notable shows such as *The Road Round Ireland* which was based on the poems of Padraic Colum with music composed by Kevin Byrne, and it did so well and got such wonderful notices that Padraic decided to come home from America when we revived it later. He was so pleased that he offered Pat his new play called *The Challengers* which premiered in February 1966. *The Road* got a New York production but Pat and Liam were very unhappy about what the New York people wanted to do with the script for American audiences and they were right, it did not do very well there.



In 1966 a show was devised by Pat and Liam, *The Spirit of the Nation*, to celebrate the golden jubilee of the Easter Rising. B.V.S reviewing for Tattler & Sketch said, "it turned out to be one of the most original and attractive tributes to this anniversary year" (Sep. 66). Another of the great successes, the adaptation of three of O'Casey's autobiographies, *Pictures in the Hallway*, *Drums Under the Windows* and *Innishfallen Fare Thee Well* ran on consecutive nights during the summer. The trilogy was performed in its entirety on a single day, lasting six and three quarter hours which earned us an entry in the Guinness Book of Records.

The theatre managed to present an eclectic programme from the start. This included verse plays, Shakespeare, neglected Irish plays, classics, adaptations and new plays by new and established writers. We presented revues, poetry sessions, play readings and musical evenings. We were a seed bed for many professional actors and directors and several of those who started at the Lantern are still in the business. The likes of Barry McGovern, Johnny Murphy, Pat Leavy, Tom Jordan, Patrick Dawson, Bosco Hogan, Maire O'Neill, Dermot Lynskey, Don Conroy and Joe Dowling. Most recently Pat (Byrne) Benedict was awarded the Harry and Martha Cohen Award for her sustained contribution to theatre in Calgary.

In such a short article it is hard to include all the people who were involved for so long with the company or all that we achieved but I am grateful to my friend Eileen Sheridan whose dissertation on the Lantern Theatre for her MA in drama provided me with valuable access to facts and dates, which made my search so easy. Thank you, Eileen. Also, a sincere thanks to the IAVI who have done such a wonderful job in having the Lantern restored. May its light shine for many more years. ♦