

Treading the boards in the Tannery Town

Portlaw's Premier Hall. Where us Tannery Town natives have enjoyed a bag of chips and a bottle of Cadet after a schools' hurling final, table quizzed on many a Good Friday, and where, for 34 years, the village's annual pantomime has been staged.

'The Hall' has provided the actors, the singers and the dancers (along with the outright chancers!) of the parish with a board treading venue to do their thing for more than a generation.

And thanks to those who've kept the Portlaw Musical Society flag flying since its foundation in October 1980, the panto has established itself as a firm fixture on the county's entertainment calendar.

The cast of 'Ole King Cole', which runs from Thursday night (8pm nightly) through to Sunday's matinee (3pm), have been put through their paces over the past two months by producer Paul Corcoran.

Steve Bailey, surely now in the Portlaw Panto veteran stakes, is once again filling the Musical Director's shoes, while Emma Larkin and Dervla Walsh, 'tiny tot' dancers in their childhoods, have choreographed the production.

And the 'tiny tots' of 2014 have benefited from the tutelage of Children's Choreographer Faith Mulcahy Drohan, who has literally taken charge of a cast of several hundred on the Premier Hall stage down through the years.

Between the Carrick Road and Coolfin and well into Portlaw's surrounding townlands, one would be hard-pressed to find a household which hasn't had some form of pantomime participation.

Be it set design, props, make-up, getting the tea ready for the interval, from ticket sales to programme editing and organising the raffle, nothing could happen on the stage without the efforts of those off it.

Since the days when Ronald Reagan won the White House, when the Coe/Ovett rivalry gripped the athletics loving world and, lest we forget, Johnny Logan won the Eurovision for the first time, Portlaw has had its pantomime.

Through the closure of not one but two tanneries, the first of which was recalled for many years on stage in what became the panto's anthem 'We Love Portlaw', the show has remained a constant in 'the village'. And it's something a great many of us are very and rightly proud of.

While the pantomime has never reached Shakespearean heights (though the balcony scene from 'Romeo And Juliet' was recreated in one production!) and for all the craic had at rehearsal, there's still serious work that needs doing.

Everyone on stage is conscious that people have parted with their hard earned cash (and there's not too much of that about at present) and punters, rightly, expect to be entertained.

The beauty of pantomime, of course, is that the odd embellishment or break from the set script is to be expected - a local panto is nothing without its parochial references after all - but there's got to be some element of control about it too.



What actors also lose sight of on occasion is that nobody in the auditorium knows the actors' lines, and it has to be said that a pantomime audience will be far more forgiving than, shall we say, one's average Covent Garden punter.

We expect the odd humorous slip-up or faux pas, we occasionally anticipate and always belly-laugh when someone literally screams to the prompter in the wings "What's my next line?"

And, as someone who's been up there, having either had a blank or trying to help a fellow cast member through one, there's nothing like warm laughter to get you back on track. It's all part of the pantomiming experience.

The theatre, at least the idealised form of theatre, should be something that's universally accessible. The notion that a night at the theatre is the preserve of toffs, snobs and a perceived 'higher class' of individual is complete and utter nonsense.