



Lupita Sheehan.

# De La Salle Musical Society's glory years

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Theatre writer Eddie Hearne looks back on the achievements and driving forces behind one of Waterford's most popular musical societies.

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**D**E La Salle Musical Society has a long and proud tradition in the cultural life of Waterford.

Although it was revived twenty-five years ago, the society can trace its roots back to December 1931 when the late Brother Bernard from Stephen Street produced a comic opera, "The Pied Piper of Hamelin."

The cast included past and present pupils of Stephen Street School, with two performances. The first was staged at De La Salle College for staff and students with the second at the Theatre Royal where it was well supported by the general public.

## SEEDS SOWN

With the seeds of light opera sown, further productions followed from 1933 to 1939 but this was then interrupted by the war years.

Productions resumed in 1944 and in 1946 the staging of HMS Pinafore by the DLS Past Pupils, under the direction of Bro. Ultan, led to the formation of De La Salle Operatic Society the following year.

## LOYAL MEMBERS

The society had many loyal and talented members over the years under the direction of Brother Ultan, Brother Bernard, Brother Columban, Brother Maurice and Brother Baptist, ably assisted by the late Stanley Bowyer, first musical director of the Waterford International Festival of Light Opera and father of showband legend, Brendan.

Producer Mrs. Pat Flood; Mrs. Nan Power, chorus mistress and set designer Michael O'Connell were other valued members during those years. And, just to prove that the greasepaint really does run through the veins, Paddy Power, Nan's son, was also a De La Salle stalwart. By all accounts, Paddy was reckoned to be the finest Mikado ever to grace the Theatre Royal.

Paddy's wife, Carmel Drohan, retired advertising manager of the Waterford News & Star, was also a keen member along with her sisters, Ita, Dympna, Monica and brother Brendan.

Names synonymous with De La Salle Musical Society over the years include Dick Doyle, Tom Heine, Con Crowley, Dick Cullen, Gerry McCabe, Jimmy O'Dwyer (the make-up man), Jimmy Ryan, Billy Deegan, Billy

Shanahan, Seán Traynor, Sylvia Walker, Tobie Hickey Snr., Anne O'Sullivan, Kevin Barden, Joe Daniels, Tess Slattery (who has hoarded all the old programmes!), Tom and Helen Walsh, the brother and sister who ran the landmark pub on Ballybricken; Gerry Flanagan, Tom Roche, Joe Farrell, who sadly passed away recently, and his wife, the former Mai Drohan.

From 1946 until 1969 the De La Salle Operatic Society performed annually in the Theatre Royal but after South Pacific in 1969 the curtain fell on their activities.

## REVIVED

However, traditions die hard and in 1979 a group of musical enthusiasts got together and in 1980 De La Salle Musical Society was revived with Gilbert & Sullivan's *The Pirates of Penzance*.

The show was directed by Brendan Drohan, now retired from the teaching staff of De La Salle College, but still actively involved with the musical society, with Brother Benedict, now the driving force behind the hugely successful College Musical Society, as musical director.



Young ballet dancers from the 1983 De La Salle Musical Society's production of *The Gipsy Baron*, which took the runner-up slot in AIMS Awards, Best Overall Show Category. The group includes Sharon Ryan, Suzanne Kavanagh, Sonia Waters, Jane Drury, Michelle Condon and Gillian Drury.

Fr. Seán Melody, currently parish priest of the Sacred Heart parish and a keen enthusiast of musical theatre, was the first chairperson of the revived De La Salle Musical Society.

He was later succeeded by Brother Finbar O'Keeffe, Mary Aylward, Trevor Stone with Mary Aylward nowback in the chair again.

The society has staged a production every year since then (although they were restricted to a choral concert in 1982) with top directors including Brendan Drohan, Ray Jefferies, Jimmy Belchamber, Pegeen Coleman, Tommy Ebbs, Peter Kennedy, Gary Power, Tara Ann Byrne and Tony Finnegan.

#### **KING REIGNED**

De La Salle shows since 1980 have included The Gypsy Baron, La Vie Parisienne, The Merry Widow, South Pacific, The Desert Song, Hello Dolly, The Sound of Music, Cabaret, Carousel, and Oliver! which they staged last January.

However, 1993/94 were red letter years for De La Salle Musical Society when their

production of Rogers & Hammerstein's The King and I proved their most successful ever.

#### **AWARDS**

Having won Best Overall Show in the 1993 AIMS (Association of Irish Musical Societies) awards, De La Salle finished runners-up to Carrick-on-Suir's Chess in the 1994 Waterford International Festival of Light Opera with Carrie Crowley scooping the Best Female Performer award for her stunning portrayal of Mrs. Anna.

De La Salle also annexed the awards for Best Choreographer (Tara Ann Byrne); Best Professional Producer (Gary Power) and Best Lighting (Aidan McGrath).

It was success on the double for Tara Ann Byrne who had earlier won an AIMS award as did Kevin Kavanagh (Best Musical Director) and Martina Flynn (Best Support Female). Martina had previously won AIMS awards for Best Actress in The Pyjama Game (1987) and Best Comedienne in Guys & Dolls (2000).



Some well-known faces from the Society's production of The Gypsy Baron, wearing their award-winning AIMS costumes, back in 1983.

Des Manahan has twice won the AIMS Best Comedian award in De La Salle shows, The Mikado (1981) and The Gypsy Baron (1983), while Tobie Hickey scooped the Best Comedian award for Guvs & Dolls.

Martina and Tobie were also among the cast of The King & I with Noel Murphy playing opposite Carrie Crowley in the title role.

Ray Collins, Tammy Power, James Tebay, Bill Carlton, Paddy Greene, Brendan Feeney and

Liam Murphy, now a theatre critic, were also in the cast of De La Salle's outstanding production.

Former Waterford News & Star journalist Richard Dowling, now RTÉ's man in the North-East, was for many years their stage manager and a committee

member of De La Salle Musical Society.

The success story is set to continue with the society currently in rehearsal for their 2006 show, "Some Like It Hot," which they stage at the Theatre Royal from January 24-28.