

## Do You Know the History of the Grand Opera House?

Read the information and answer the questions at the end.

On the 23 December 1895, the Grand Opera House opened to the public with a production of the pantomime 'Blue Beard'. On stage that night, welcoming the audience, were Joseph Warden, the owner and Frank Matcham, the architect of the building. The Theatre was originally named the New Grand Opera House and Cirque. Matcham designed it so it could be transformed into a luxurious circus within the space of 24 hours. The Theatre changed its name to The Palace of Varieties in 1904 and presented a twice nightly variety programme until 1909, when it was renamed the Grand Opera House.

The First World War had very little impact on the Theatre as touring theatre companies could travel to Belfast. However, during the Second World War, with restrictions in place, it was much more difficult for theatre companies to travel to Northern Ireland. The Theatre Manager at that time, Edward Buckley, established a repertory company called The Savoy Players. Week after week, this Company staged nightly performances, with two shows on Saturdays. Over the lifetime of the company, a performer would have studied 30 pages of script a week, 1,560 pages a year or a total of 7,500 pages!

In 1944 the United States Army presented 'This is The Army', by American composer Irving Berlin at the Grand Opera House. The US Army were accompanied by General Dwight Eisenhower, who was awarded the Freedom of the City of Belfast in the same year. Eisenhower later served as the 34<sup>th</sup> President of the United States from 1953-1961.

By 1960 the Grand Opera House had been taken over by the cinema company, Rank Odeon. During this time the Theatre continued to host seasons of ballet, opera and pantomime. The Theatre continued to screen Rank's classic films until 1972 when the building was sold. The building was going to be demolished, however, The Ulster Architectural Society campaigned to save the building and the Theatre became the first listed building in Belfast in 1974.

The Theatre was bought by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland in 1976, it took four years to restore it, reopening in September 1980. In the 1890s it took 12 months to build! The Grand Opera House remained open during 'the Troubles' in 1970s, 80s and 90s with a few exceptions. In 1991 and 1993 the Theatre was severely damaged by two massive bombs, when it closed for repairs.

The Arts Council of Northern Ireland owned the Theatre until 1994, when they handed over management to the Grand Opera House Trust and then ownership to The Grand Opera House Trust in 2000. The same Trust which still owns the Theatre today.

May Mc Fettridge is the Theatre's popular Pantomime Dame; she has been performing in pantomime at the Grand Opera House for 30 years!

Over its lifetime the Grand Opera House has staged over 5000 shows with over 25,000 performances! The Grand Opera House has welcomed approximately 35 million patrons since 1895.

The Grand Opera House will celebrate its 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in December 2020.

### Questions:

1. What year did the Grand Opera House open to the public? \_\_\_\_\_
2. What was the name of the first show performed there?  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. What is the name of the architect who designed the Theatre?  
\_\_\_\_\_

4. What were the two other names the Theatre was given in the 1900s?  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. What was the name of the repertory company set up during the Second World War?  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. What was the name of the composer who wrote the show the US Army performed at the Theatre?  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. **Fill in the blank:**  
Eisenhower later served as the \_\_\_\_\_ President of the United States.
8. What is the name of the cinema company that bought over the Theatre?  
\_\_\_\_\_
9. In what year did the Theatre become the first listed building in Belfast? \_\_\_\_\_
10. How many years has May Mc Fettridge performed in pantomime at the Grand Opera House?  
\_\_\_\_\_
11. How old is the Grand Opera House? \_\_\_\_\_