



HEADLINES FROM HISTORY

Athlone: a musical extravaganza



IAN KENNEALLY
Historian and Author

It was the show that had it all: love affairs, warring half-brothers, on-stage swordfights, secret identities, dastardly gentlemen, outlandish plots, grandiose sets, ornate clothing and lots of singing.

It starred one of the most adored performers of his time and it made famous the song 'My Wild Irish Rose'. That show was 'A Romance of Athlone' and for about a decade at the beginning of the 20th century it played before excited audiences across the United States of America.

The story of how Athlone, if only for a regrettably short time, became synonymous with passionate invincible love begins with a performer named Chauncey Olcott. In 1899, when he first starred in A Romance of Athlone, Olcott was one of the most famous entertainers in the USA, renowned as a singer, songwriter and comedian. So great was his popularity that, according to a contemporary report in the New York Times, Olcott spent many years travelling across America performing plays 'fashioned almost solely to provide opportunities for his singing'. Each of those plays, of which A Romance of Athlone was one of the most popular, earned what the paper described as 'a fortune'.

Charming Chauncey

For Olcott's many fans he was the epitome of charm. As one reviewer put it: 'He is in a high degree magnetic; a handsome personality combined with an earnestness and artistic comprehension that has won him an enviable position on the stage today.' Another reviewer said of the audience reaction to A Romance of Athlone: 'it's Olcott's charm that wins the following.' Olcott regularly ended his performances to rapturous applause, repeated requests for encores and with bouquets being tossed on stage.

Yet, like all performers, Olcott had his critics. One New York reviewer dismissed Olcott's abilities, judging that A Romance of Athlone was 'laughable only in the sense that it is an absurd slamming together of a number of the most conventional episodes'. Even so, the reviewer, seemingly frustrated that his or her opinion was very much a minority one, admitted that such a critique would do little to dampen Olcott's appeal. 'In fact', the reviewer concluded, 'he simply defies criticism'.

Chauncey Olcott, the man who defied criticism, was born John Chancellor Olcott in Buffalo, New York, in 1858 (some accounts say



A publicity still from a 1905 production of A Romance of Athlone. Chauncey Olcott is in the centre of the image. The other actors are, from left to right, Louise Maselli, Olive White, Richard Malchien, and Matt B. Snyder.

1860). His connection to Ireland was through his mother, Margaret Doyle from County Cork, who had emigrated to the USA with her family when still a child. Olcott was educated in Buffalo before making his stage debut around 1880. For the next few years he performed in minstrel shows, an extremely popular theatrical style in which white entertainers painted their faces black and performed song and dance routines in a racist caricature of African-Americans. Olcott's ability as a singer was noticed by Lillian Russell, the renowned actress and later advocate for women's suffrage, who cast him in her 1886 Broadway production 'Pepita'.

In 1890, Olcott travelled to London where he studied music for two or three years. While living in London, he made his first visit to Ireland and polished his Irish, or perhaps Oirish, accent. After he returned to the USA that accent became a vital component of his performing persona and he starred in a succession of productions with Irish subjects such as 'The Minstrel of Clare' in 1896 and 'Sweet Inniscarra' in 1897. Two years later, Olcott's manager, Augustus Pitou, put together a new vehicle for Olcott's talent. This was A Romance of Athlone, a production for which Olcott wrote five new songs.

Passion, Deceit, Athlone!

The play, divided into four acts across two and a half hours, is set in the vicinity of Athlone around 1800. Olcott was keen to portray Ireland in a positive light, particularly at a time when stage-Irish stereotypes were common in American theatre. As such, the central character of Dick Ronyane, played by Olcott, is brave, honest, quick-witted and affectionate. Yet he also has an impulsive side as described by one reviewer: 'He will sing or fight upon the slightest provocation and the one appears to give him fully as much pleasure as the other. In the play he sings more than he fights because there is one man who invites a fight while a dozen ask him to sing.'

When the play opens, Dick has just returned to Athlone and the home of his father, Sir Phillip Ronyane, after an absence of three years. He returns to find that his older half-brother Francis has fallen under the sway of the devious Standish Fitzsimmons, the play's chief villain. Dick also encounters the extremely wealthy Major Manning of 'the Irish Brigade' along with his daughter Rose and his ward Eleanor MacBride. But all is not as it seems for Rose and Eleanor have actually swapped identities.

Sir Phillip and Major Manning had come to an arrangement that

Francis would marry the major's daughter, although neither partner in this proposed marriage had previously met each other. Rose is understandably perturbed by this proposal and she convinces her father to introduce her to Sir Phillip and the Ronyane family as his ward and to introduce Eleanor as his daughter. Francis then courts Eleanor, believing her to be Rose. The real Rose, however, posing as Eleanor, falls in love with Dick. Fortunately for both Rose and the plot, Dick also falls in love with her.

This convoluted situation is further complicated by Standish Fitzsimmons. Not only does he lead Francis astray but he plans the abduction for ransom of Dick's young sister. Among many other schemes of villainy Fitzsimmons draws Dick into a duel with the aim of seeing the hero killed. The resulting on-stage swordfight, in which Fitzsimmons's wicked plans are thwarted, thrilled audiences. Apart from defeating Fitzsimmons, Dick saves his sister, earns the respect of his father, places his half-brother Francis on the right path, gains the gratitude of numerous women and, most importantly, wins the heart of the beautiful Rose who reveals her true identity to one and all. To celebrate this love match, Dick launches into a

new song, My Wild Irish Rose.

Wild roses and smiling eyes

My Wild Irish Rose became an instant hit. Contemporary newspapers reported that, in the year's after the first performance of A Romance of Athlone, Olcott was compelled to keep the song in his repertory since audiences invariably requested its performance. That success encouraged Olcott to continue songwriting and he co-wrote the lyrics to 'When Irish Eyes Are Smiling' as part of his 1913 production 'The Isle O' Dreams'.

Olcott's career declined after the First World War but that was due to deteriorating health rather than diminishing popularity. Illness forced his retirement in 1925 and he died in Monte Carlo in 1932. His widow, Rita O'Donovan Olcott, wrote his biography and a fictionalised version of that book was transferred to the silver screen in 'My Wild Irish Rose', produced by Warner Bros in 1947 and starring Dennis Morgan as Chauncey Olcott. While the biography and movie have faded from memory, Olcott's legacy endures through his songs which have been covered by many singers including Athlone's John McCormack who recorded My Wild Irish Rose in 1914.