

FROM TWINKLE TO SOUTH CAROLINA (AND BACK!)

Geoff Bowden meets up with Christine Yates



Mother Goose, Hanley with Kay Lyell

If anyone ever doubted that versatility was a great asset when trying to get ahead in show business, they need look no further than the career of Christine Yates. This actress, singer and dancer has played in many West End musicals, including *Cabaret*, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and *The Sound of Music*. She played *Eliza* during the original run of *My Fair Lady* at Drury Lane as well as on the national tour and went on to play *Marion* in the national tour of *The Music Man* and *Kathy* opposite Bryan Johnson in a tour of *The Student Prince*. She toured Australia in the two-hander musical *I Do, I Do* and played leading roles in many musicals in America. Straight drama experience has ranged from summer repertory seasons here to *Shirley Valentine*, *The Lion In Winter* and *Separate Tables* in the States. Christine has also proved to be an accomplished director both here and in America and in later years staged and compiled a number of musical revues. It is, however, her early career that will be of most interest to *Call Boy* readers when her professional life was dominated by pantomime and summer seasons.

Chris hails from Llandudno and her first professional work was in that resort playing 'walk-on maid' roles in such productions as *Nest Of Robins* starring Sonnie Hale. Thanks to Hugh Stanhope, a member of the Grand Order Of Water Rats and a family friend, she was invited to audition for Frank Maddox who ran the Theatre Royal in Bath. Maddox was impressed and gave Chris the role of principal boy in *Mother Goose* for the 1957/8 season. Christine remembers that the costumes were superb and every change came with matching tights. She also recalls that Nellie Maddox, Frank's mother, kept an eagle eye on everyone's costume from front of house during the run and woe betide anyone who wasn't immaculately turned out.

Stanhope was also instrumental in introducing Christine to Clarkson Rose, the result being a contract for the 1958 edition of *Twinkle*, Rose's famous concert party. "Discipline in the *Twinkle* company was very strict", recalls Chris, "but I found that wonderful and plenty of shows I went into later in my career could have done with that kind of discipline. The scenery and costumes were always very elaborate, especially for the show's finale. I remember for one of the programmes, we had a huge chandelier and all the girls were dressed in white crinolines. We looked like white snowflakes!"

The 1958 *Twinkle* cast, which included Anne Daly, Norman Stanley, John and Alan Vicars and Chris Carlsen, proved a great success on tour and at their summer residency in Worthing and the same company returned to the resort the following summer.

Pantomime wasn't forgotten and in December 1958, Christine appeared for Derek Salberg at the Alexandra Theatre, Birmingham as principal girl in *Puss In Boots*, opposite a male principal boy in the shape of singer Dennis Lotis. Also in the cast were that great dame George Lacy, up and coming comic Norman Vaughan and Terry Hall with *Lenny the Lion*. The following year Christine, Norman, George and Terry recreated their roles in *Puss In Boots*, this time at the Grand, Wolverhampton. Her principal boy this time was the popular singer Lester Ferguson. "Sadly George Lacy was taken ill," recalls Christine, "and had to cancel. I told Salberg that I had just finished a season with Clarkie



Robin Hood, Richmond

and, as far as I knew, he wasn't booked for panto, so Clarkie came aboard. I remember he made me do his 'Hole In The Bucket' routine with him and kept hissing at me out of the side of his mouth "Corpse! Corpse!" This was so the audience would think he was being extra funny on stage and would laugh accordingly, while he milked it!"

1960 found Chris joining the hallowed ranks of that premier concert party *The Fol De Rols* for their summer season at Hastings where the company was led by Jack Tripp, Kathleen West and singer John Gower. "I adored Jack," said Christine "He was just wonderful and Kathleen was a superb broad comedienne. Again discipline was the keynote and of course the material and costumes were first class. I noticed when I joined the company that I was in the first four numbers of the show, all requiring a different costume. I said "That's impossible" to which I received the rather dry reply "It's been done." Of course they were quite right and I just underdressed like mad!"

Pantomime that Christmas took Chris to Hanley for *Mother Goose*, where she played principal girl with Ken Platt, Billy Burden, Terry Scott and the unforgettable Kay Lyell as *Priscilla the Goose*.

1961 found Christine working for Hedley Claxton as leading lady in *Gaytime* at Weston-Super-Mare with Ken Roberts and The Jones Boys. "Ken was a very funny comic, so good in sketches," recalls Chris, "but the company had less discipline and sometimes the dancers were all over the place! I became good friends with another act in the show, accordionist Gwenda Wilkin, who taught me to drive during the season. We both owned dogs that stayed in the dressing room during performances. I remember whenever Gwenda played Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsody* her dog would howl!"

Christine remained in the south of the country that winter as she played the title role in *Goody Two Shoes* at Bournemouth Pavilion with her *Fols* companion John Gower as principal boy. Comedy was in the sure hands of Richard *Mr. Pastry* Hearne and Billy Burden.

The following Christmas found Christine as *Goody* at the Newcastle Empire with the glamorous Yana as her principal boy and comics Nat Jackley and Bobby Pattinson. By this



Yana and Christine in Goody Two Shoes at the Newcastle Empire

time Christine was busy carving a niche in musicals and there was to be only one more pantomime in the Yates career. In 1967 at Richmond she returned to the role of principal boy when she played, according to *The Stage* review, 'an exceptionally full voiced, melodious and handsome *Robin Hood*' in *Babes In The Wood* with Duggie Chapman as dame.

Actually, 1967 proved to be an important year for Christine as she appeared in the West End production of the musical *110 In The Shade*. It wasn't a success but it did introduce Chris to her future husband, Broadway leading man Stephen Douglass (the original star of *Carousel* in London) and after many years in South Carolina, they have now returned to this country to live.



Puss In Boots, Alexandra Theatre, Birmingham with Norman Vaughan, George Lacy, Dennis Lotis and Terry Hall with Lenny the Lion