

THE NIGHT ERIC MORECAMBE DIED

by Alan Randall



Eric Morecambe

Stan Stennett, who was putting on lots of shows at the Roses Theatre in Tewkesbury, rang me to ask if I would do a very special charity show, and would I book the band. He had secured the services of Eric Morecambe who, without his partner Ernie Wise, would do a solo spot to close the first half of the show. It was mainly to be a matter of questions and answers with Stan, who was a good friend of Eric, doing an interview with the great man. I didn't know Eric very well. I had only worked with him and Ernie a couple of times on *Workers' Playtime* radio shows, and only a couple of weeks before this particular night Eric and I had been guests of Roy Castle on a programme called *Castle's On The Air*.

I remember arriving at the Tewkesbury theatre wearing a big black leather overcoat and Eric saying, "Don't say you've brought your xylophone and set of drums on the back of a motorbike! Where have you parked? I'll give you a hand to bring them in." He was never lost for a funny line. I arrived for rehearsal during the afternoon and Eric said, "Where's your dressing room? I bet you haven't got one - you'd better come in with me." That was the sort of man Eric was - a household name, but there was no side to him. Anyway, in I go and we must have chatted for a couple of hours. He seemed as if he wanted to talk to me, mainly about the business, football and how he wanted to give up the pressure of work and semi-retire. He said he would like a nice little place in Bournemouth; he would like to be by the sea. On reflection, although I didn't think about it at the time, he talked to me as if he had been a good mate for years, and yet I hardly knew him apart from TV, and like the majority of the public, I was a big fan.

Before the show a waitress came to the dressing room asking if we wanted drinks - a drop of brandy or a few

beers. "No thanks," said Eric, "but I would love a big pot of tea." He asked me and I said that tea would be fine.

The show went on and Eric, even without Ernie, was wonderful, having the audience in stitches answering Stan's questions. During the interval he had another pot of tea sent round to the room. Then I went on to do my act, which was to close the show. I was aware of Eric standing in the wings occasionally shouting - "Go on lad, let 'em have it" and odd friendly remarks. But I was completely unprepared for what happened when I went into my final routine, *The Entertainer*. As I was playing the grand piano, Eric came and sat beside me on the piano stool and started larking about pretending to play. I then moved to a set of drums and with a big bass drum proceeded to march up and down the stage - followed by Eric who had also picked up a drum. Then I moved to the vibraphone for the last few bars. Eric said, "Which note do I play?" I gave him a C to bang. As the number ended he spoke to me the last words Eric Morecambe ever said, "Is that it then?" with a flourish of his glasses as the band began the playing-off music.

Eric walked about half a dozen steps to the side of the stage and fell to the floor. As I bent over him I could see that this was a very serious situation. I ran back on stage and stopped the band who were still playing the tabs music. An announcement was made for a doctor to come to the stage. Eric's wife Joan, Stan's wife and my wife Mary were sitting together in the audience, and immediately Joan said "It's Eric" and rushed on stage. A doctor came and attended Eric until the ambulance arrived and took him to hospital but he never regained consciousness.

At 3 o'clock in the morning Stan rang to say that Eric was dead. I didn't sleep. At 6 o'clock I received a call from a daily newspaper saying, "I believe you shared a dressing room with Eric Morecambe last night, and that you were on stage when he collapsed." I agreed. He then said, "Can you confirm that Eric Morecambe had been drinking heavily before he went on stage?" I was furious. I told him about the tea and that I was absolutely disgusted by the suggestion, and after giving him a mouthful of abuse I slammed the phone down.

Later that day George Bartram, press agent for Morecambe and Wise, rang me to say that he had received a call from a theatre not too far from the hospital, where Eric had died only nine hours before, to find out if Ernie Wise would be available for pantomime. I would not have believed it, but George was not the kind of man to have made it up and he said it was for real.

It was a really sad and upsetting time: the end of the wonderful Morecambe and Wise.

(Editor's Note: Shortly before his death, when he was too ill to write, Alan Randall dictated two articles to the Reverend Guy Bennett, the above being one of them. We published Alan's first article in the last issue of *The Call Boy*).