DEAR DEAD IRVING THEATRE

Recalled By Norman Dannatt

Creed (Music by Ronald Cass) The Company Original Sin (Music by John Pritichett) Betta St. John, Ronnie Stevens and Larry Hagman The Price of Fame (Peter Myers, Aloc Genhame and Jerry McKnight) Alichael Medwin, Betty Marsden and Eanies Gayson An Important Question That We Really Feel Should Be Answered Panela Manson That's What I Dislike About The South (Music by Ronald Cass) Betta St. John and Larry Hagman Maugham Move Over (By Dick Vosburgh) Michael Medwin Ragtime Girl (Music by John Pritchett) Berty Marsden and Ronnie Stevens Benshuxury Thomas Cook Michael Medwin France Eunice Gayson Russia Betta St. John with Dick Vosburgh Baltic States Larry Hagman and Pamela Manson Austria Ronnie Stevens Mother Europe Betty Marsden	Peeps At A Diary (Peter Myers, Alec Grahame and Dick Vosburgh) The Company (Music by John Pritchett) Eunice Gayson Rale Of Three (Music By Ronald Cass) Berly Mursden. Michael Medwin and Pamela Manzon Regency Belle The Singer (Music by John Pritchett) The Singer (Rusic by John Pritchett) The Dancers Bette St. John and Larry Hagman Some People Say That Travel Broadens The Mind But We Don't Thick So (Music by John Pritchett) Michael Medwin introducers Berly Marsden and Eunice Gayson Square Dance (Music Stevens) Actors Malevolence (Music Stevens) Actors Malevolence (Music Stevens) Termination (In collaboration with Dick Vosburgh, Termination (In collaboration with Dick Vosburgh, The Company At the Piano (Ronald Cass)
Empire Day (Mutic by Norman Dunnatt) Singer (Mutic by Norman Dunnatt) Singer (Mutic by Norman Dunnatt) Singer (Music by Norman Dunnatt) Empire Day (Music by Norman Dunnatt) Commerce (Music by Norman Dunnatt) Eunice Gaysum Modieval (Michael Medwin Michael Medwin Mury (Michael Medwin Mury (Michael Medwin Mury (Michael Medwin Mury (Michael Medwin Music by Men Tynan) Comperce (Michael Medwin Michael Medwin Micha	Directed by Michael Anderson and John Regan Dances by Betta St. John Dector by Richard Lake Costumes designed and executed by Hilary Viryto and Rosemary Carvill Wigs by Gustave Costume Hire by Samuels Scenery built by Frank Drury Lights by Major Equipment Ltd. Ferbol Frogramme by Barry Duncan Nyion Stockings by Kayser Bondor Cigarettes by Abdulla Business Manager Staff Director Stage Manager Assistant Stage Manager Press Representatives BOX OFFICE (PRUDENCE MYERS) WHI 8657

The programme of the Irving Theatre's first night.

Reading about the death of Danny La Rue reminded me of the tiny theatre where his spectacular career made its start.

The Irving Theatre, small and decidedly intimate, was in Irving Street (from which it got its name), a turning off Leicester Square. In its short life it became, one after the other, an intimate revue theatre, a straight theatre, a Grand Guignol theatre, a drag show theatre and, finally, winding up as a strip show theatre. Its owner, Mr.D.F.Chaudhuri ruled his theatre with a rod of iron. In those days the Lord Chamberlain was very strict and Mr.Chaudhuri made sure that all of his writers toed the line.

It opened with two outstandingly successful late night intimate revues (The Irving Revue and 10.15) written by Peter Myers and Alec Grahame with music by me and others. Peter later achieved fame as the writer of several West End revues, successful radio shows, and the Cliff Richard films.

As they were late night shows, actors were able to join the audiences after their own shows had closed for the night. I saw Noel Coward, who arrived with Pat Kirkwood, sitting there on the first night.

That first night starred many artistes who later became famous: Betty Marsden (distinguished actress and

the many female characters of Round The Horne); Betta St. John (Bloody Mary's pretty little daughter, Liat, with Happy Talk in South Pacific); Larry Hagman (also from South Pacific as a sailor singing There Is Nothin' like a Dame; he used to cycle to the Irving immediately after South Pacific at Drury Lane - I wonder if he gave Betta a lift on his bike's Michael crossbar?); Medwin (Cockney actor whose successes included The Army Game and as Don Satchley in BBC's Shoestring); Eunice Gayson (she married on the American sponsored TV programme, Bride And Groom, and in Dr. No she was the first girl to bed James Bond); Humphrey Lestocq (Flying Officer Kyte in Waterlogged Spa and, later, Mr. Turnip); Shani Wallis (Princess Maria in Call Me Madam - she got more ecstatic newspaper reviews than the leading lady and soon after appeared as Nancy in Oliver!) and Gabrielle Brune (star of the film The Titfield Thunderbolt - recently shown again on TV and as entertaining as it was all those years ago). Michael Anderson was director of the first of the revues (later to direct the film Around the World In Eighty Days) and Dick Vosburgh, a prolific scriptwriter, was stage manager.

There were other intimate revues, one of which was written by Jimmy Wilson and Digby Wolfe, with music by John Pritchett and me. Jimmy was

Dr. James Wilson Muggoch, an anaesthetist and husband of Betty Marsden. Digby disappeared and then eventually, years later, resurfaced in America as the very successful writer of the Rowan and Martin TV show, *Laugh-In*, for which he won an Emmy in 1968.

As a change from revues, a Victorian melodrama *The Drunkard* ran successfully for more than fifty performances. Audiences were invited to hiss, boo and pelt the villain with fruit provided by the management. It attracted other members of the acting profession in to see the show. It was said that Hermione Gingold bawled out witticisms and jeered and cheered along with the rest of the audience.

Peter, for another change from revues, put on Grand Guignol. It was most realistically performed to such an extent that two ambulance men were on duty to help members of the audience who fainted. The most horrific scene was the last act of Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus, with blood all over the stage. The son of the leading lady was in the audience, sitting next to the theatre critic of one of the newspapers. This critic boasted that the horrors of the show would have no effect on him. In the scene a lady walks in with both her hands cut off and her tongue cut out, with blood everywhere. The son of the actress stood up and promptly fainted. He landed on top of the critic and knocked him out. Afterwards the critic was heard to say that he could not understand how the show had made him faint - it had never happened before. We never enlightened him.

Mr. Chaudhuri finally settled down to his most successful formula - strip shows that ran for four years until his death and the demise of the Irving Theatre. Unlike so many other strip shows where the girls just took off their clothes to recorded pop music, Mr. Chaudhuri insisted on his girls being able to act and perform original songs accompanied by a pianist (and behave themselves - it was like a nunnery backstage). There were two complete casts who took it in turn to perform non-stop. Two men acted as comperes and also took part in ensembles. I remember Victor Spinetti and Barry Martin taking it in turns. Mr. Chaudhuri gathered to himself a

coterie of lyric writers and composers who were expected to write songs that were witty and gave the girls a logical opportunity to strip off (without finally moving, of course). I was one of the composers and wrote music for Vaughan James, Jimmy Wilson, George Edge, Brian Rooney, Arnold Porter and Peter Millar. I called myself a sausage-machine composer. My songs were sold outright to Mr.

Chaudhuri for £2 and 10 shillings a song and as I only bothered to make one copy of each (there were no duplicators in those days), I have completely forgotten many of them. In fact one of the girls had a row with Mr. Chaudhuri and walked out, stealing all the music from the piano, and I had great difficulty remembering the tunes to write them out again.

(Editor's Note: Norman mentioned that Digby Wolfe disappeared in the fifties only to reappear years later in America. I believe for several years Digby moved to Australia where he became a regular television performer and presenter, compering such variety shows as *Review '61* and *Review'62*)