

THE TERROR OF CRANBOURN MANSIONS

Norman Hoskins recalls Cissie Williams

Quite recently, I received a call from two dear old friends, Gerry Glover and Johnnie Cliff. "We are doing duty at the British Music Hall's Memorabilia Exhibition," they said. "It's only ten minutes walk from Bermondsey Station. Why don't you come along? It's right down your street, so to speak."

Well, the ten-minute walk was an understatement, to say the least. However, on arrival at the studios, imagine my amazement to be confronted by a featured display of dozens and dozens of the box office cards I had designed for the redoubtable Cissie Williams, some fifty years ago.

For my younger readers, perhaps I should explain that a box office card was the basic layout for advertising most big music hall shows. The card itself was fifteen inches high by ten inches wide and was the basis for the big posters displayed on advertising hoardings.

You may not have heard of Cissie Williams, but this lady was the booking controller for Moss



Hylda Baker

Empires, then probably the biggest chain of live theatres in the world. Their offices were at Cranbourn Mansions, Leicester Square. Cissie reigned supreme in the world of the music hall for some thirty odd years. It was she who negotiated the fees paid to artistes. This set the gold standard; other theatre circuits paid proportionately less.

As assistant advertising manager it was my job to receive the booking sheets from Cissie and display the acts in an arrangement that would pass her 'eagle eyed' judgement. The secret was to make lots of 'tops of the bill'. My 'piece de resistance' was a box office card - unfortunately missing from the exhibition - for Finsbury Park Empire, on which I had managed to place six well-known variety acts side by side. Charlie Kunz, I recall, was the number one. The poor printers were often forced to shave the wooden letters to make them fit into such restricted spaces. The result was barely readable, but it was designed to make the punters think they were getting great value for their money.

Although Cissie controlled the bookings, the overall supremo of Moss Empires was Val Parnell, later to achieve national fame for producing *Sunday Night at the London Palladium* for ITV. Mr Parnell believed that the 'lions share' of the available money should be spent on the 'other side of the footlights'. He did not believe in over-paying his staff. What is more, he demanded value for money at all times.

For example, in some weeks I would have to produce up to twelve box office cards, plus half a dozen quad crowns. 'Quads' were medium size posters, forty inches high by 60 inches wide, a



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completely different layout to the box office cards. These were usually displayed on boards outside newsagents and the like. The reward for this publicity was two free stalls seats at the local theatre for the first house Monday night.

Surprisingly enough, the formidable Cissie was a very shy person who rarely met artistes or agents. One life-long performer recently asked me if she was glamorous? Well, to be honest, she was anything but. In fact there were occasions on which she had been mistaken for a cleaner.

One of her many eccentricities was to restrict the use of the word 'comedian' to only one act on any bill. As there were often several funny men in any show I had to find alternatives such as, 'laughter raiser', 'humourist' etc. My good name was often maligned for having to describe performers, such as the great Jimmy James, as a mere 'humourist'.

My final duty of the week was to collate sets of slides, which had to be posted to theatres, promoting the next week's acts. Again,

Cissie's 'one comedian only' rule also applied to the showing of slides. As each slide had to be hand-coloured and photographically reproduced, avoiding possible repetition of the dreaded word became little short of a nightmare.

Although most of the staff went in fear of the lady, I can recall only one occasion when I was summoned to the 'presence' to receive a reprimand. It was the practice to allot space on a layout

calculated on fees and popularity of a performer. Although Hylda Baker was only a medium priced act at the time, I thought that, as she was wowing audiences, she should receive enhanced billing. Cissie, however, did not agree and consistently reduced her space. Foolishly I persisted, not appreciating that Hylda was clearly in the doghouse. Doubtless, she had committed the unforgivable sin of over running her act. The result? I received the dressing down of a lifetime. "You

must be in love with this bloody woman", shrieked Cissie. "The next time she comes in I'll bring you two face to face". It was a terrifying spectacle. I backed away murmuring apologies. "Come back here," she thundered. Oh happy days!

It's great to know that some people still like to recall the great days of the Music Hall. To be honest, I loved every minute of my days with Moss Empires, Cissie Williams notwithstanding!