

The World's Most Unusual SHOW BUSINESS NEWSPAPER

by GORDON IRVING

Words of green

Some journalism colleagues in the States quote "Variety" as a fine example of unique, concise, terse, modern newspaper writing. And all over the world, each Thursday, newspapers quote reports or exclusives from "Variety", picked up by the wire services in New York.

In his green-painted office (he even uses green notepaper and green pencils), editor Abel Green, a personal friend of all top U.S. stars, told me: "It's by now pretty well conceded that we can recognise a general trend as fast as the other feller, but we're still sticking by our basic job . . . covering the amusement trade.

"We're out to give the show-business news BEHIND the news. We're all against people who think it clever in themselves to successfully suppress information but impudent in reports to successfully get the news anyhow.

The paper's bosses admit they "won't cop any prizes for pure English". Nevertheless, they insist on a strict discipline in style among their far-flung staffers and correspondents, from the Lebanon to London, Glasgow to Karachi, Paris to Pittsburgh.

"Variety" demands that its men-on-the-spot call a spade a spade, and a lousy show a lousy one. So it uses the simple initials "n.s.g." Used of a stage or TV show, they can be utterly damning. They mean, simply, "not so good".

In over 65 years there have been over 3250 issues. They circulate world-wide, and are read by different sections of society—from Bob Hope and Danny Kaye to church groups and educational bodies, public relations groups, third-rate comedians in Chicago and first-rate ones in Britain.

The "sheet", as it likes to call itself was founded by Sime Silverman, a far-seeing Jew, in 1905. The first issue had 16 pages and sold for five cents.

In its early years powerful individuals boycotted and blackballed the paper for daring to be literal about its editorial policy, as outlined in the first issue: "Nothing will be suppressed which is considered of interest . . . the reviews will be written conscientiously . . . if it hurts, it is at least said in fairness and impartiality".

In her palatial home in Monte-Carlo Princess Grace of Monaco sits back once a week and starts to read a newspaper that plonks through her royal letter-box each Saturday.

For the next hour she is deeply immersed in the latest trends and gossip and trade chit-chat from Times Square and Chicago, Hollywood and London. Though now a European royal personage, the one-time Grace Kelly, film star, can't get show-business out of her system.

So the next best thing to participating as a lovely of the silver-screen is to read all about it. Like hundreds of others, the Princess finds the answer in the pages of an 80-page weekly paper published from a little green office at 144 West 46th Street, just off Broadway, in New York.

They call it "Variety", and now it's celebrating its 65th birthday. It uses the oldest words and phrases, a sort of language all its own, to notch up the latest happenings in movies, television, radio, music, records, concerts, opera and straight theatre.

The most surprising types read or subscribe to "Variety". Her Serene Highness, Princess Grace, yearly enters a subscription. Ex-King Alfonso of Spain used to brush up on American slang and American customs by reading the paper.

In New York the tycoons of television study "Variety" as soon as it hits the news-stands each Wednesday morning. In London the British tycoons of television (or "video", as the paper calls it) skim avidly through air-mailed editions, flown by jet from New York; they can make themselves aware of new entertainment deals or profitable trends by studying box-office returns or inside-angled news from studios and theatres.

Today the paper, edited by a 60-year-old show-business veteran, Abel Green, is bought on the Strand in London, the Unter den Linden in Germany, and the boulevards of Paris. When the late Lord Reading was Viceroy of India, he often asked for "Variety" with his gin-sling at his club. Its "slanguage" fascinated him.

Andy Stewart reads the 80-pager to see what's new in the States, where he takes Scottish acts, Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Sammy Davis, Junior are all subscribers. So are people like Tom Jones, Harry Secombe and David Frost.

Titular contortions

Headings in "Variety-ese" have become classics. For a report of a collapse of air-conditioning in Pittsburgh theatres, the heading thought up was: PITT CAUGHT WITH ITS PLANTS DOWN. A news-story on toll television was headed: NOW IT CAN BE TOLL. A capital-gains-for-actors analysis was bannered: LOOK, MA! I'M A CORPORATION.

Here are some of the more interesting words coined by "Variety".

An "aislesitter" is a theatre critic. "Heavy mitting" reflects the sound of handclaps and means "good applause". A Scots comedian who "garners loud yocks" is one who pulls in loud laughter ("Yock" is the sound you give out when you laugh—"yock, yock, yock").

A "praise-agent" is a press agent with a superlative for every show. A "chantoosie" is a girl singer. A "warbler" or a "thrush" is a singer, female variety.

"Variety" is not the kind of journal that favours superlatives. Fan magazines may call almost everyone a "star", but he remains an artiste, performer, or thesp (actor) in the eyes of this entertainment journal.

The paper's editor, Abel Green, advises: "If a performer or any creative artiste is bad, say so honestly and forthrightly. But also try and show him where he can improve his act. That's the trade angle. Just dismissing him perfunctorily with a snide crack, or piling on a "pan" notice, especially if they're very bad, is like kicking a guy when he's down."

I once took Danny Kaye to task in the columns of "Variety" for saying England when he meant Britain. He apologised by cable within hours of the paper hitting the news-stands in New York.

A stone's throw from the bright lights of the Great White Way, now a rather trashy-looking Broadway, with its legit theatres still shining amid the amusement palaces and sexy-film palaces, I met young Sid Silverman, grandson of the paper's founder.

He sits in full view of the passing street public, behind a glass window on the first floor of the all-green office bannered "VARIETY".

Swinging names

Top celebrities from television—Johnny Carson, Merv Griffin, Andy Williams—are regular visitors to the

The World's Most Unusual Show-Business NEWSPAPER! contd. office on West 46th Street. So are veterans like Jimmy Durante and Jimmy Cagney.

Trade terms used by "Variety" have been passed on until today they are accepted by the man-in-the-street. That's why many a lay reader now digs headlines in his own daily newspapers about "pix" that "click" and do 35G biz, and femme stars loaded with "s.a." who are "socko" at the "b.o." (box office).

An "ozoner" is a drive-in theatre. When Maria Callas created a hubbub at the Met Opera, it became "Callas-thenics". "Variety" sub-editors are great punsters, aiming all the time at punny reading.

Prostitutes, in the language of "Variety", are dubbed B-girls, prosties, femmes du pave, joy-girls.

Members of what it terms the third sex are "shims", "limp-wrists", or just "the soprano-hipped set".

Audiences that applaud are giving out with "hand-to-hand music". A

musical film biography is termed, snappily, a "biopic". A Western on your telly is described as a "they-went-thatawayer".

The new crop of neo-beatnik "sick" comedians are called "sick-niks".

When Grace Kelly married Prince Rainier the Third, "Variety" listed their wedding among those of dozens of other show-business folk, termed Grace Kelly as a "film-actress", but her groom as, simply, "a non-pro".

That's "Variety". That's the world's most unusual show-business newspaper.