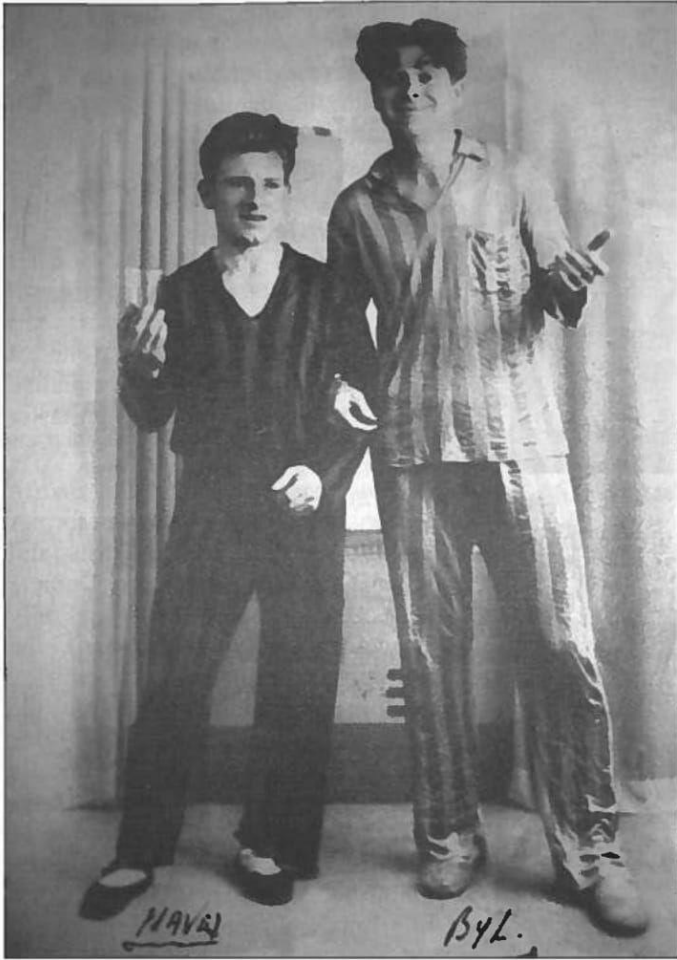


# DONOVAN & BYL - THE ASSASSINS OF SORROW



Haval & Byl

In a 1945 film short entitled *Randle & All That* an acrobatic duo called Donovan and Byl perform a four-minute routine called *Tumbling Tomfoolery*. Their performance is both hilarious and poignant and as curators of everything related to the Mancunian Films collection, we are always looking out for more information regarding these two clowns. For a long time we knew nothing more than their publicity billing describing them as 'The Assassins of Sorrow' and we'd just about given up the ghost when in 2006 an email arrived via [www.itsahotun.com](http://www.itsahotun.com) that gave us cause for celebration and excitement.

The sender of the message had just seen the *Tumbling Tomfoolery* extract that is available to view in the Films section of the website and there was a description in that email of how watching the footage had brought her to tears. She had been searching the Internet for information about Donovan & Byl (the latter being her grandfather) and she was delighted to discover footage of him with his stage partner performing their act all of sixty years ago! Overcome with emotion as she disbelievably watched their antics, she immediately wrote to us.

As you can imagine we were very excited at making this contact with Coralee Patel, Byl's grandchild, and even more thrilled to learn that four of his daughters live in the

North West of England. We made arrangements for us all to get together and so, just after New Year 2006 Coralee brought three of Byl's daughters, Thelma, Hazel and Carol, to 'Hotun Central' in south Manchester and so began a fascinating conversation about their father and his life in show business. Around a table groaning under the weight of Christmas cake and old playbills we sat down and reminisced while John E Blakeley's grandson Mike filmed the proceedings. Their story was as engrossing as their act.

William Skisby-Thirlaway (that is Byl, the taller of the two in the act) was born in Gateshead in 1900, the illegitimate son of a Danish sea captain. Thirlaway was the name of the family who adopted him; Skisby is the name of a seaport in Denmark and possibly his father's surname as well. He served in the First World War as an infantryman and ended up being posted to Russia, which may explain why his daughters were convinced (possibly erroneously!) of the fact that he could speak Russian! Thelma gave a demonstration of some of the phrases he taught her though none of us, including her, knew what any of them meant! In later life he told his daughters that he only saw action once and that resulted in him accidentally shooting a donkey when it wouldn't give the proper password! After the war he was demobilized and became one of the hundreds of thousands of unemployed who were left in the cold by the Great Depression.

The daughters recalled that it was on a patch of wasteland next to a dole office that Bill Thirlaway discovered his natural tumbling abilities whilst he and other blokes 'messed around to kill time.' Soon he'd worked up an act

<b>THEATRE ROYAL</b>	
Tel. : Ash. 1252	ASHTON-UNDER-LYNE Tel. : Ash. 1252
Bookings Office Open Daily 11 to 1 and 4-30 to 6-30	Manager : W. GIBSON
<b>6-30</b>	<b>Monday, Feb. 16th, 1948</b>
And during the week <b>TWICE NIGHTLY</b>	
<b>Saturdays Only 6 &amp; 8 p.m.</b>	
ERIC MARTIN presents	
<b>"HERE'S TO YOU"</b>	
A Variety Show of Pleasure and Merriment	
DIRECT FROM HER SCREEN RADIO & STAGE SUCCESSSES	
<b>LYNDA ROSS</b>	
SWEETHEART OF SONG	
<b>THORLYLE SISTERS</b>	<b>FISHER DIXON and NORAH</b>
FOUR FEET OF RHYTHM	VENTEROLOGICALLY VINDICTIVE
<b>HAVAL &amp; BYL</b>	
FUN IN A BEDROOM	
<b>LES GUNBY</b>	<b>JIM BLACK and VI GILMORE</b>
THE JOCULAR LAD	VERSATILE MUSICAL ENTERTAINER
DEBONAIR COMPERE <b>SYD WALTON</b>	
<b>ELVA LEDSON</b>	<b>BEE THORBURN</b>
JUST KIDDIN'	
Richard Wharwell (Bolton) Ltd. Fold's Road, Bolton.	

with another unemployed Geordie and they started busking outside pubs and theatres. They soon were offered the chance to perform inside the venues and by 1925 had adopted the stage name of the Atlas Brothers. They were playing in Manchester in the late 1920s when Coralee's grandmother, also called Coralee, arrived at his digs as she made her newspaper deliveries on her motorbike. Captivated by her leather helmet and kiss-curl hair, Bill invited her for a meal and after a whirlwind courtship they were married. After two children had entered the scene they decided to move to Blackpool where five more Thirlaways completed their happy family.

The daughters of Byl explained to us that the stage name was changed intermittently, probably in order to get more work if theatre managers became bored with them. The Atlas Brothers were replaced by Haval & Byl ('Fun In A Bedroom', 'Up With The Lark'), then became Donovan & Byl ('Assassins of Sorrow'), back to Haval & Byl in 1948 and there were also two others: The Brothers Havalaff ('Comedy Acrobats') and Hymas and Cece ('Sensational Balancers'). In total there were three Donovans but only the last one, Harry Rush, was allowed to put his head down Byl's trousers - let us quickly explain ...

For the stage act, Bill wore huge baggy trousers, down the front of which would go Donovan's legs and arms, and in Harry's case his head, in fact anything that was upside down at the time! Quite how they got into these ridiculous positions has to be seen to be believed - just watch the film! The highlight of their tumbling tomfoolery act, when Harry's head 'disappears' down Bill's mouth is awesome! Their 'Fun In A Bedroom' act opens with both of them

'asleep' in a large, iron bed accompanied by the tune *Lazy Bones*... 'sleeping in the sun' ... and, as the two acrobats groggily 'wake up' it becomes clear that the bed is a trampoline upon which their particular routine ensues!

It's astonishing to realize that Bill is 45 years old in *Randle & All That* and in 1955, ten years later he and Harry were still working as tumblers in variety and, with Bill on 60 Woodbines a day that is quite some going. His daughters also told us that he never touched alcohol and was a wonderful, generous, warm-hearted family man. When he did eventually retire from the stage, his career killed off by television, he took a job as a concierge at the Blackpool Opera House. There he would reminisce with old friends about his days in ENSA during the Second World War, recall how he gave Max Bygraves his first start in concert performance, tell of his friendship with Hylda Baker (who used to baby-sit for his children) and his associations with Jimmy Clitheroe, Frank Randle, George Formby and many more. At 80 years of age Bill was still balancing on his head to the glee of his grandchildren. Surrounded by his family in Blackpool, he passed away in 1982, gone but no longer forgotten because of the wonders of the Internet!

If anybody has any further information they would like to share about Donovan & Byl, please contact Chris Lee at [cp@itsahotun.com](mailto:cp@itsahotun.com)

#### **CP and Pam Lee**

**(Editor's Note:** The website [www.itsahotun.com](http://www.itsahotun.com) devoted to the comic Frank Randle and the Mancunian Film Company was of course featured in our list of useful web sites in the Winter 2009 edition of *The Call Boy*)