

# MY MOM, JESSIE JEWEL (1910 - 1995)

by Tony Craig



Jessie Jewel

Jessie Jewel (my mom) was born into a show-biz family, and first appeared on stage quite by accident. At the age of three, Jessie was watching her mom and dad perform on stage, while peeping through a crack in the scenery door when it gave way, and she literally fell headlong on stage in front of her first audience. There was a peal of laughter, she picked herself up, curtsied, and then left the stage to a round of applause - so that was the start of a very long career.

Jessie's father and mother were, (I'll use their stage names), Fred Ellis and 'Merry' Marie Liston, and early on in their careers they formed a comedy singing and dancing act called Hand and Hart, and also appeared in pantomime, with Marie playing principal boy and Fred playing comedy roles such as Man Friday, or Buttons. He also put on his own pierrot shows in the summer.

Mom was the youngest of three children. First came Emily Elizabeth in 1897 (stage name: Rae Gladwyn), then Joe in 1900 (whose early stage name was Gordon Gay), and then Jessie was born in 1910.

Everybody had to earn their keep in show-biz families in those days, and as soon as the 'kids' could legally appear on stage, they did, whilst going to a different town and a different school every week. It just shows how our profession has diminished over the years. I have Fred's date books from 1911 to 1919, and if the family had two weeks 'out' each year that was all, so they didn't see their home in Wolverhampton very much.

Sometimes the theatre and the digs would be fine, but sometimes not. If everything *was* fine Fred would say, "We've got a whole week here", and if things really *weren't* fine, he would say "Well, we've only got to be here for a week!" He didn't like moaners in shows, his philosophy was 'Grumble and GO, don't grumble and STAY.'

When Jessie was seven years of age, she joined her mom and dad and her siblings in the family act, which by then was called The Greenlees, a five handed act which had originally included another girl who was not related, but, of course, when Jessie was old enough to join the act, the other girl had to leave. The act played all over England, Scotland, Wales and

Ireland just after WW1 with Jessie now a part of it. As there was always a strong bond between Ireland and the USA, Fred decided to say they were Americans, and as very few people owned a radio, and as talking motion pictures didn't arrive until 1926, and with the invention of TV many years in the future, they actually got away with it!

Fred decided that The Greenlees were getting a bit 'old hat' and a new image was needed, so their new act, The De Novo Five was born. Fred would, as always, paint all the scenery himself and even carve the wooden clogs that they would wear to dance in, for their Dutch scene. In 1921 the De Novo Five were offered work in France with The Great Raymond, who was a world class American illusionist, and a rival of Harry



Jessie Jewel as Dick Whittington 1938



*The cast of Are You Listening (1926) with Jessie 2nd row 3rd from the right and her brother Joe 2nd from the left in the back row with his arm around Sid Field.*

Houdini. In fact, after one heated argument between Raymond and Harry ended in blows, the two never spoke to each other again.

With The Great Raymond, the family played leading venues all over France, from Paris to the South of France and was sad to see the devastation that many towns had suffered in WW1. The De Novo Five did their usual act, but also assisted Raymond with his illusions. I recently made contact with an American magician and magic historian, who owns a vast collection of memorabilia of many of the world's great illusionists (including The Great Raymond). He has, in his collection, the pig-tail wigs that my family wore on stage dressed as Chinese, when Raymond would make them disappear, and he was kind enough to e-mail me some photos.

Jessie had the ability to squeeze her hands down to the size of her

wrists, which would have been an invaluable asset to an escapologist (no handcuffs could ever hold her). Raymond wanted to train Jessie and take her back to the USA, but her dad didn't even consider that for a moment.

The De Novo Five continued to play in France and North Africa for about two years, despite the fact that Rae, (mom's sister) left to marry a Czechoslovak musician and acrobat, so the De Novo Five, became The De Novo Four.

The family returned to the UK, but Fred's health was deteriorating, and in 1924, aged 52, he died in Wolverhampton. Jessie had always been a daddy's girl so, as she was only 14 at the time, it dealt her a terrible blow, and she missed him for the rest of her life.

Marie, Jessie's mom, felt she was beginning to look her age, and retired, so Jessie and her brother

Joe formed a double act (dancing and quick costume changes), calling themselves Jewel and Ring. From then on Jessie became Jessie Jewel and Joe became Joe Ring. In 1925, with Jessie now just 15 years of age, their act took them to the Victoria Palace, where the top of the bill was De Groot (the world famous violinist), and Nervo and Knox also appeared (before their Crazy Gang days).

Years of playing in revues continued for Jewel and Ring, such as George Bliss's *Are You Listening* in 1926 with the great Sid Field also in the cast. Eventually Jessie and Joe both decided to follow their own individual careers.

From the early 1930s Jessie started playing principal boy in pantomime (as her mother had done before her), while her brother Joe played comedy roles such as Buttons (as his father had done

before him). Later Joe went on to play Dame. One of Jessie's most valued possessions was a *Dick Whittington* hat worn by her mother in panto in 1895. I still have that hat.

Jessie, who was already a good dancer and singer, taught herself to play the ukulele-banjo (a very popular instrument at the time), and extended her talents as a stand-up comedienne on radio and in variety. 1937 came and she married Archie Craig, who was a clarinettist and band leader. Later Archie (my father) was to perform a comedy musical act in variety.

The 1938/39 panto season found mom and her brother playing principal boy and dame in *Bo-Peep* at The Theatre Royal, Bristol, with the great Harry Tate playing baron. Jessie's brother Joe also produced the show. Harry had a wonderful sense of fun on and off stage, and he enrolled them both in a show-biz club he had formed with Wal Pink, called the 'Ye Dirty Olde Tramps', giving both Jessie and Joe elaborate certificates of membership.

Jessie's career, now under the management of Bernard Delfont (years later to become Lord Delfont), went from strength to strength, and she appeared on the bill in Moss and Stoll theatres with artistes of the calibre of Max Miller, Evelyn Laye, Richard Tauber, Florence Desmond, Donald Peers, Albert Whelan, Afrique and so many more.

It was 1945 and Jessie had been booked to play at the Stage Door Canteen on Wednesday 15th August. This was an American-run club for Allied Service Personnel at 201, Piccadilly. The venue was about the size of a small theatre with a good sized stage, tabs and a grand piano on stage. The main difference between it and a conventional theatre was that there were no permanent rows of seats,

so the audience would pull their chairs on to what would, later that evening, become the dance floor so that they could watch the acts. They would then move their seats off again when the dancing was to start. Anthony Eden, Foreign Secretary at the time and years later to become Sir Anthony Eden and Prime Minister, opened the venue, and Bing Crosby and Bob Hope performed there on the opening night. Subsequently, many other stars and bands from the USA and the UK played there.

Now the trouble was, Wednesday 15th August 1945 turned out to be VJ Day (Victory over Japan Day, which marked the complete end of WW2), and the streets in London's West End were absolutely jam-packed with people. Mom's taxi couldn't get her to anywhere near Piccadilly, so she explained to a policeman that she had to entertain the troops at the Stage Door Canteen that night. Of course, she had her trusty Keech ukulele-banjo with her, so as everyone else was doing the conga round the streets, Jessie, and this policeman, both conga'd their way to 201, Piccadilly. Now, that's really what you'd call a police escort! Barbara Mullen, later to play Janet in the long running TV series *Dr. Finlay's Casebook*, was also on the bill, and the two of them shared a dressing room. The evening must have been quite a success, as Jessie was booked to play there again just a few days later, on Sunday 26th August 1945, but this time she was hosting the evening.

As the years went on and it was apparent that variety was dying, Jessie played long summer seasons and each summer from 1948 - 1952 she played The Amphitheatre in Rhyl with *The Quaintesques* company, thinking up many different comedy characters for her acts. For a few seasons her comedy 'partner in crime' was Danny O'Dea, who years later played Eli



Jessie Jewel

Duckett in 93 episodes of the long running TV series, *Last Of The Summer Wine*.

Jessie, of course, also continued to play principal boy in pantomime, and for quite a number of panto seasons she played boy to Dan Leno Junior's dame. Dan made a really delightful dame, but he would regularly lose his voice for the first few days of each panto run. Being a true 'pro', mom would always cover his lines for him, till his voice returned. Though it is so many years ago now, I can still remember standing in the wings (as a little nipper) watching the two of them enchant the audience.

More years went on and Jessie decided to hang up her principal boy tights and move on to playing dame, which she did with great success, and she still continued to play long summer seasons. Reaching the age of 60, and having been a 'pro' for 53 years, Jessie decided to retire and never appeared on stage again, which was a pity because, with her skill in dialects, she could have fitted in so well playing a character in *Corrie*, *EastEnders*, or, of course, *Last Of The Summer Wine*.

Thank you for joining me on this journey - maybe we can do it again sometime.