

NAN KENWAY AND DOUGLAS YOUNG

A Music Hall Diary - 1945

by Hilary Young

My parents met in that popular theatrical format, the summer concert party – so much part of the pre-war seaside holiday. My father said that he married my mother because she was so good at working the material he wrote. It was that material and their mutual sense of comic timing that made their name on radio. The sketches, full of puns about food, with the catch phrase *Very Tasty, Very Sweet* made Kenway and Young an act that found its way to the top of the variety bill without the usual need to work up from the bottom. When Lord Reith's BBC first sought light entertainment in the early 1930s, it looked towards the popular medium of variety for performers. There were some problems with adapting traditional variety to radio as many comics were just used to performing the same polished act year in, year out. Many were also drawn from the concert party tradition where the experience of working with others in sketches was an advantage. (The Variety Department of the BBC was evacuated to Bristol on the outbreak of war, subsequently moving to Bangor in North Wales when the bombing became intense.)

My father's 1945 diary opens in Burma, spending 2 months with ENSA where they crossed the Irrawaddy behind the advancing troops. It continues through that summer recording life on the variety circuit. Kenway and Young were unusual as a male/female double act. They were both of equal stature – not working as comic and feed. The first date is Derby where the manager insisted on billing them as Douglas Young and Nan Kenway, attempting to reflect the usual gender balance.



The Startled Hare sketch



Nan and Douglas with Hilary's Picture on the piano

Then in the first week of June they are in Plymouth sharing top with Billy Ternent's Band: *'Cigarettes seem suddenly to be very short. Blast! Peace seems worse than war – even the capture of Haw-Haw fails to cheer me as much as it should.'*

One is reminded how awful theatre dressing rooms could be by the comment, *'A member of Billy Ternent's Band, who dresses below stage, had the lining of his coat and all his trouser buttons eaten by rats.'*

Back in London, *'Nan goes to Empire, Croydon to take the band-call.'* The weekly ritual in variety theatres on Monday mornings, when artists put their band parts down by the footlights in order of arrival, forming a strictly adhered to queue. My parents' variety act was in three parts, opening with a classic character sketch in which my father was the landlord of an old country pub, *The Startled Hare*. A sketch they worked for about twenty-five years. My mother, who was originally a concert pianist before turning to comedy, followed the sketch by playing a shortened version of the first movement of the Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto. Perhaps a forerunner to

Classic FM, this always went well with an audience unlikely ever to have been to a concert. They finished the act with a mixture of impressions and items at the piano. The Tchaikovsky called for some skill from the conductor and pit orchestra, and for a decent piano. Problems with both occur throughout the diary. But this week: *'Terrific audience. Everything right including piano and orchestra. Nan is happy.'*

At Croydon: *'Have asked the SM to do what he can with our bar counter. It's falling to pieces. He also thinks he can fix us up with a mirror and tubular lighting for the piano-keyboard, complete with case. Something MORE to travel!'* The mirror fitted in place of the keyboard lid, lighting and reflecting the fingers with dramatic effect. They were already touring with a crate to contain the bar counter and backcloth, a wardrobe trunk, a dumb piano keyboard for practice, two personal suitcases, and a typewriter. Like many variety artistes they needed a baggage man - Garners was theirs - to look after their stuff and move it from station to station in London. All their journeys at that time were by train.



On the Friday: *'We went to tea with Ted and Barbara Andrews (who are on the bill with us)..... and admired their daughter Julie aged 9. Sang three songs for us - amazing voice and excellent little musician.....quite frightening to see so much brilliance in one so young.'*

The following week they played second top to Vera Lynn at Shepherd's Bush Empire. *'Vera goes on late in the second half of 1st House and early in the 2nd. We swap with her so we go on at 6.30 1st house and 9.45 2nd. What a hell of a wait! I do think that arrangement for stars is a selfish one.'* That swapping of places on the bill reminds me of the illuminated numbers on either side of the

proscenium telling the audience which act was coming on next - by reference to their printed programme. Unlike the image that we have of Edwardian music hall, and indeed of modern stand-up comedy, variety, at that time, didn't have a compere to introduce the acts. The only intro was the orchestra playing their signature tune.

After a week at Wood Green Empire sharing top with Forsythe, Seamon and Farrell they head for Ipswich, a smaller theatre, where they top the bill. *'Two good houses but too long a programme - 9 acts. We go on at twenty to 8 and 10 in respective houses.....dullish audiences - but then we go on so late I don't wonder. Performing cats on the bill so presume my jacket won't be eaten by mice this week. Ipswich very overcrowded with lots of navy and American types. Practically all the pubs closed. Very little beer, no scotch and few cigarettes. Very depressing - we both feel we must go out to Burma again.'* On the Friday: *'The manager asked me to cut 'bloody' out of our act as the Chief Constable was in 2nd house.'*

By contrast the next week at the Royalty Chester was a success: *'A nice intimate theatre with an exceptionally efficient staff and a charming manager who made himself known to us - most rare.'* The excellence was marred on Saturday when the leader and trumpet were missing from the orchestra!

Sunday was one of those dreadful travel days that variety artistes had to endure. *'Stood to Crewe - had tea during a 2-hour wait - then stood to Derby - changed again and stood to Nottingham where we waited a hell of a time for a taxi.'*

At the Empire Nottingham, *'the first house rings up at 4.55 - we are on about 5.20.'* Georgie Wood was top. On the Friday they had a *Workers' Playtime* broadcast in Edgware: *'ENSA met us at St Pancras and took us to the factory. No run through. Crowded platform, did not know how to get on for instruments. Found that the Censor had cut my script - 'house with all modern conveniences'. I ask you!....Lew Grade turned up the moment the broadcast was over (12.55) and drove us like hell to St Pancras arriving 1.15. Caught the 1.20 train. Arrived Nottingham 4.20 - and to the theatre just in time for the first house. Had we been late, Georgie was standing by to go on in our place, bless him.'*

One departure from the norm is noted on Saturday morning - *'We were paid last night so went to the bank.'*

Theatre managers didn't trust performers. They were normally paid cash during the 2nd house on Saturday night leaving my father to travel home with a bundle of white fivers distributed round various pockets. And another touring problem: *'Still no laundry from Chester.'*

That Sunday was the recording of the first of a new radio series in which they joined B. C. Hilliam in his *Flotsam's Follies* so after the 2nd house they caught the 1.30am train from Nottingham. *'Had previously tipped inspector who got us a 1st class compartment and locked us in on our own. Slept fitfully till 5.30am. No blasted porters at St Pancras. Had to get a 4-wheel truck and hoist baggage onto it myself getting dirty and angry. 3 hours sleep and then to rehearsal at 11oclock.'*

Next week at Chiswick Empire: *'Terrific audiences a joy to work to – we did go well.'* A joy that was only marred by, *'Just heard on the wireless that Churchill has resigned. I feel as if some bloke has murdered my best friend.'* Also on the bill was the illusionist, Cingalee: *'very temperamental about lights, stage and orchestra - why can't people make corrections in a dignified way?'*

As a 9 year old, illusionists were always my favourites. I also delighted in Wilson, Keppel and Betty when they were on the bill. Then there was Koringa – the only woman fakir - who kept three crocodiles in a large tank of warm water in the wings. When free of her attention, the largest of the crocs, about 6 feet long I guess, would always head down left to terrify the drummer in the pit.

For the week of 30th July I was with them in Scarborough where they were topping the bill at the Grand Opera House. *'Crikey, what a dingy hole. The "dressing room" is just a small cupboard with no window and the presentation is too dingy for words.'* By contrast, the following week at the Birmingham Hippodrome: *'It is really an excellent bill this week. Enormous houses and good audiences and what a well run theatre back-stage.'*

Then it was the Palace Theatre, Huddersfield where *'we are billed like a circus, sole top. Good houses, but dreadfully quiet audiences. Really grim. Typical Yorkshire.'* Wednesday was VJ Day when he *'woke to a dull, cold morning looking out onto the dirty, black station building outside the window; men fixing strings of triangular flags; church bells ringing, but no sign of riotous behaviour.'* On Friday night after the 2nd house they went to Slaithwaite to choose the Victory Queen, where the chairman effusively welcomed *'these famous people – but mind, we've as good and better here as any as comes.'* Which was only topped by the waitress who'd looked after them all week in the hotel, *'You was lucky you was with us in Huddersfield....you might after all 'ave been anywhere.'*

A good week at Bristol with another broadcast in London on the Sunday before the night journey to Liverpool: *'Arrived Euston just in time. No sign of theatre baggage. Tipped 2 porters to send it on just as the train steamed out. Felix Mendelssohn and his Hawaiian Serenaders top, we are second, Syd and Max Harrison 3rd. We have to follow Syd and Max. Difficult as they are a terrific laughter act. Dull audiences.'* Again, down to London on Saturday night but *'Felix Mendelssohn is playing Leeds next week so his manager is taking our theatre baggage on, thank god.'*

Leeds was notable for *'the most wonderful digs ever – grand hot supper waiting for us.'* I had been with them that week – though I don't remember the digs. On Saturday morning I was put on a train to London on my own. They were to follow that night on the sleeper. *'We finished our act 2nd house at 7.45pm; had a car outside the stage door and caught the 8.08pm to Manchester. No-one but a Music Hall artist would know what this means.'*

The diary ends at the Kingston Empire: *'What an audience! Terrific!'*

The following week they set off again to Burma to entertain the troops. From working the Empires to the far flung Empire.



Tucked into the diary is an example of my father's comic verse - in this case, not one that was intended for broadcasting:

*I think there's not a single pro
Who, having toured ten years or so
Can swear on oath, without evasion
There never has been ONE occasion
When he has let a PEE take place in
His dressing room's clean wash-hand-basin.*

*I'm certain lots of actor-chaps
Have in their time turned on both taps
And then and there contrived to smuggle
Their urine down a wash-bowl plug-ole.*

*Girls are, of course, above disgracin'
The bowl which one should wash one's face-in
For instance, take those famous daughters-
Elsie KNOWS where Doris Waters.*

*But take our Jack, that Dock-Green-Copper;
Has he always piddled proper?
I bet he's used his bowl because-it
Took too long to find a closet.
And Arthur Askey, too, I swear
Has oft times jumped upon a chair
And, drowned by the noise of H and C
Has had a busy, busy pee.*

*I'm certain Cyril Fletcher, too
When far too rushed to find a loo
Has used a wash-bowl's spotless spode
As if it were the Odd Commode.*

*Of course you men who are not pros
Will all start saying, I suppose
'The wash-bowl! What a damn disgrace!
Why can't they use the proper place!'*

*This poem may seem crude, I know
But still, I feel it's a-pro-pos.....
The moral is, please be like me
And always use the W.....C ?*