

ROBERT NESBITT AND ME!

by Rosalyn Wilder



Robert Nesbitt

I have often thought that serendipity can play a vital role in life and certainly a chance meeting in 1959 with a man I knew from my time at the Lew and Leslie Grade Agency proved so for me. He asked me if I was working or looking to work and when I said I might be looking for something if it were interesting, he offered me a few weeks working with a man I had only vaguely heard of – Robert Nesbitt – while his secretary took maternity leave. That ‘few weeks’ turned into twenty years and proved to be one of the most influential periods of my life. In retrospect I can only hope that I took the opportunities offered to learn as much as I could about what was known as ‘Light Entertainment’, for I surely had the finest master anyone could have.

Robert Nesbitt (1906–1995), son of a schoolmaster, was educated at Repton and briefly at Oxford (he left before he completed his studies

there) and enjoyed a brief career in advertising during which time he met some people in the theatre and, as a consequence of those meetings, wrote lyrics for some of the revues of the time which led him, in 1932, to produce his first revue, *Ballyhoo*, at the Comedy Theatre. It was the beginning of a long and illustrious career in the theatre. Mr. Nesbitt – how few dared ever call him anything but Mr. – looked like a banker or chief executive of a highly successful company. He talked like one, too. He dressed in Savile Row suits, hand made shirts and shoes and his ‘trademark’ was an ever present bottle of champagne. Behind that façade lay a brilliant mind with the ability to conjure up, in a flash, the outline of a show, be it panto, summer show, floorshow, Royal Variety, fashion gala, with all the glamour, sophistication, style and magic anyone could ask for. As I started to write this I looked back on some of the many obituaries written at the time of his death and was reminded how much his image impinged on people’s view of him. Urbane, sophisticated, courteous, stylish and, above all, a gentleman are just some of the words used to describe this master of spectacular entertainment.

My first few days at the offices on the top floor of Westcombe House, Whitcombe Street didn’t exactly get off to a good start. I was intrigued when he walked in for the first time to see this good looking, rather formal man. He asked if I could operate the (tiny) switchboard. I said I wasn’t too sure and that was

confirmed as I cut off the first several calls I made for him! He then asked if I could type. “Not really,” I replied. He looked slightly bemused but said he thought we might be able to work things out as we went along. I can’t pretend that things got much better in the ensuing weeks but somehow we muddled along and one morning he came in with a broad smile to tell me he had some news from his absent secretary. I felt the moment of departure drawing near but to my amazement he then said she had decided not to return after all and that would seem to mean that we were going to have to get used to each other! Strangely, for all my inefficiencies, I really did want to stay. I told him it had never been my intention to be just a secretary – hence the inability to type – but that if we could work something out so that I was rather more than just a secretary (a bit cheeky considering my total



Rosalyn Wilder

ignorance of almost everything!), I would love to stay.

We were coming up to pantomime time and he disappeared regularly to the Palladium leaving me kicking my heels in the office. One day I decided that sitting alone there was not for me, so I just went to the Palladium, marched up the aisle in the stalls and sat behind his production desk. He raised an eyebrow but didn't say much; in fact, he just left me sitting there for some considerable time. Then he turned and said, "Would you tell Keith that the 2K is too far downstage on the OP side?" I leapt to my feet and made a dash to find 'Keith'. I gave him the message and then asked exactly what it meant! Thus my induction to the backstage crew at the Palladium and to matters technical – I was on a roll. I strolled back, trying to look as nonchalant as possible and told him I had delivered the message and Keith was dealing with it. That appeared to do the trick. Slowly he called upon me to get more and more involved; no more sitting in the office. The world of auditions, contracts, rehearsals, rehearsal pianists, rehearsal rooms, choreographers, costumiers, musical arrangers, orchestras, backstage and front of house opened up to me. And not only at the Palladium. Robert Nesbitt was the creator and director of everything at the Talk Of The Town, too.

As I think back I am not sure how we managed to cram in the amount of shows that we did. The workload was prodigious: Palladium pantomime, Palladium summer show, frequently a limited run between those two (things like *The Music Box Show* with Liberace and a great supporting cast), the Talk Of The Town floorshow and (from 1961) a star artist that changed every few weeks, too. Then there was the Royal Variety Performance (I worked on 18 of those with Mr. N.) and a vast array of fashion shows for various organisations and the refurbishment of a variety of Forte chains and hotels like the old

Quality Inns and the Waldorf Hotel. It was pretty hard work but, thinking back, I realise that the secret of his success was his ability to select a fantastic team of people to work alongside. It was a great privilege and a joy to have met so many amazing people, people with talent and vision. There were very few arguments as we all respected each other and each made a unique contribution to the success of each project.

I can't really write a show by show article as it's all too far away to be able to remember each one in detail but much of what we did remains with me and I hope to recount a personal memoir that might help bring some of that magical time to life.



Mr. Nesbitt was a great 'doodler' and frequently a few scraps of paper on his desk with titles like *Fine Feathers*, *Magnifique* or maybe a very brief outline of a pantomime or an occasional costume or scenery sketch were the first intimation of what was next on his mind. Confronted, he would say, "*Magnifique?* Yes, good title, isn't it? I think I have most of it in my mind. Do you want to know?" I would then be treated to a pretty well-filled description of a show. That might be mulled over for a while with more and more scribblings appearing, and then the first call to Robert St John Roper, the amazingly talented costume designer, then to Billy Petch, if it

was the Talk Of The Town, or maybe some other choreographer for the Palladium. Tod Kingman would be drawn into a first meeting to discuss scenery ideas and then Burt Rhodes would appear to hear ideas for the music. For me, the wondrous part was having all of these creative minds in my office; huge pieces of paper with wonderful sketches being pored over, altered, discarded, refined; music being played on the grand piano; records and later CDs being played. Slowly, it began to gel. I began to get it down on paper and eventually there was talk about how it should be cast. Chorus auditions would take quite a long time, especially for the Talk Of The Town as dancers were required to be much taller than for other venues and the showgirls had to be an absolute minimum of 5'8" and were usually taller than that. Billy Petch and Mr. N. danced around each other trying to pick girls (and boys) they each felt would be best, and frequently they were at odds with each other. When the final selection had been made we moved on to casting the principals. Various rehearsal pianists were called upon and many hours were spent for chorus, principals, lighting calls, run-throughs without orchestra until the show began to gain cohesion and everybody learned their role.

I have one abiding memory that I must share at this time. I left Mr. N. in 1960 for a few months to have my son and when I came back he always wanted to know how the baby was getting on. One day Mr. N. was very late arriving at the office. Mrs. Nesbitt wanted to speak to him and kept calling to ask if he had arrived. When both Mrs. N. and I had just about decided he must have met with some great accident, he arrived carrying a huge Fortnum and Mason wrapped package under his arm. Having ascertained that he was well, he then proceeded to very carefully unwrap this parcel. It was, he explained, Howard's (my son) Christmas present. Out it came – a wonderful American steam engine complete with cowcatcher on the front! This Savile Row suited

gentleman then got down on all fours and with great whoops of 'Woo Woo' proceeded to show me what a splendid machine it was. I gave grateful thanks and rewrapped it. But, he said, there was a condition to Howard having it! He had to have it back immediately after Christmas as he needed to give it to Tod Kingman as it would be the inspiration for a piece of scenery for the Talk Of The Town!

To get back to the plot, it has to be said that whilst Robert Nesbitt was undoubtedly a genius at creating amazingly spectacular entertainment, the minutiae of dealing with budgets (heavens, what were they??), rehearsal schedules, orchestra calls, shoe fittings, organising the wardrobe department and a million other items left him cold and so grew the ever popular cry of, "Mrs. Wilder will do that"; "I don't know – you'll have to ask Mrs. Wilder"; "Has Mrs. Wilder agreed to that?", and many similar such quotes.

As I wrote that last paragraph I suddenly realised how, in this time of what was 'dress down Friday' and increasingly looks like 'dress down all the time', and when just about everybody calls everybody else by their first name (do surnames exist any more?), how old fashioned it must seem to refer to each other as Mr. This and Mrs. That, but nonetheless that's the way it was. I think if any of the chorus, and even some of the backstage crew, had called me Rosalyn they might have been shot at dawn! There were a few brave souls who called Mr. Nesbitt, Robert and I did hear someone call him Bob! But I don't remember ever seeing them again! Add to that, the fact that EVERYONE wore a suit and tie and I was forbidden from wearing trousers - it was skirts and high heels. I do remember going out on an open articulated lorry just before Christmas to publicise the up-coming Christmas show *The Man In The Moon* at the London Palladium. On top of the lorry were a crowd of Mrs. Lester's Little People wearing huge Martian

costumes and me. It was freezing! We drove all over the West End trying to drum up trade - nobody took a blind bit of notice - and by the time we got back to the Palladium I thought I'd died from hypothermia. Out came some of the crew to help us down and then came Mr. Nesbitt. I reached out and asked him to give me a hand to clamber down. He looked at me and then said, "You're wearing TROUSERS", and walked off and left me!

However, to get back to the main plot, much of what I have just related may seem frivolous but it really wasn't. There was a definite discipline to our work and that helped us to respect each other. We knew that Mr. Nesbitt had a deep understanding of what he was doing. He was one of the great lighting innovators and designers; he was always in the forefront of the latest in everything. We were the first to use radio microphones in a show environment. Much of the material, such as fibre glass, fibre optics, special fabric created by Sekers, special processes to make materials fire-proof, was researched and often had never been used before. He used sophisticated mechanical devices to create spectacular effects. He spent many hours sketching designs for programmes, posters and other publicity items and he made a knowledgeable contribution to the

music being used. He had a great eye for costumes and effects and had a tremendous ability to deal with people, however big or small they were, and those qualities earned him the undying respect and, quite often, affection of those with whom he worked.

I don't want it to sound as though he were some kind of super hero. We all had our moments with him as he could be bitingly difficult and he could appear to live on another planet, but most of the time if he said it was so – it was.

I always find the best way to give a flavour of the man and the times is to relate a few vignettes and I hope you will indulge me and enjoy the pictures I hope they create in your minds:

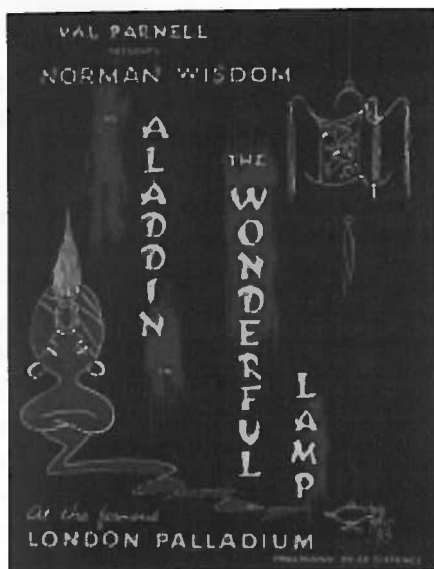
Long before Richard Wilson came up with the catchphrase 'I don't understand', it was Mr. Nesbitt's signature phrase. If he was lighting he could take days and it did tend to get a little wearing, especially for the follow spot operators cramped in a smallish box high above the stage. When they got totally fed up with doing nothing and being ignored they would call down to Mr. Nesbitt on the intercom:

"Sir."

"Yes, Bill (or whoever), what is it?"



Robert Nesbitt, Harry Secombe, Ginger Rogers, Herb Albert, Rosalyn Wilder, Des O'Connor, Cilla Black
(Royal Variety Performance, 1969)



“Carboning up, sir.”

“Oh, really. It doesn’t seem that long since last time. I don’t understand!”

Nevertheless, down they came and had a cup of coffee and a cigarette and went back to spend more time being ignored.

It is late morning. I am in my office, three floors up, front of house at the Talk Of The Town (we moved from Whitcombe Street in 1966). My telephone rings:

“Hello?”

“Good morning, Rosalyn.”

“Oh, good morning, Mr. Nesbitt.”

“Is that a cat I see on the stage, Rosalyn?”

“Um, I’m not sure, Mr. Nesbitt. Bit difficult for me to tell from here. Does it look like a cat?” “Yes, it does. You know I don’t like cats; what is it doing here?”

“Well, if it looks like a cat I have to say it probably is one and, as to what it is doing, I’m afraid you have me there. Yes, I do know you don’t like cats, Mr. Nesbitt but I rather think the problem is that the cat may be unaware of that.”

“Well, could you please come down and get rid of it.”

The ‘phone goes down and I descend to the stage to rectify what is clearly a difficult situation!

Let me draw a picture of the office: rather nice furniture with quite a lot of pictures on the wall, a grand piano and two black filing cabinets - not the usual type of course - far too garish - these are a rather elegant matt black. I am new to the job and I look to see what is in them. One drawer has a few limp looking files scattered inside. The next has a few files with what looks like some letters and the bottom drawer has a homburg hat in it. In the other cabinet, two drawers are empty and the bottom one has a half bottle of scotch in it. Now, that may seem a trifle eccentric but the interesting thing is that, twenty years later, they were just the same. Mr. Nesbitt did not believe in writing letters. I well remember putting a few unopened (would I dare open his mail?!) letters on his desk. He came in, opened and read them, passed them over, one by one, saying “Oh, a little note from so-and so” or “Such and such wants to know this or that”, etc. “Would you like to reply to them?”, I asked tentatively. “Oh, no,” came the reply, “I’ll give him/her a call.” The other answer frequently given was, “Not to worry. If they want me, they will either write again or I shall see them.” He never saw the point in writing letters. So, that meant nothing to put in the filing cabinets. QED.

The champagne, Moet or Bollinger mostly, was never far from his elbow, along with a few dry biscuits or some cold sausages. Lunch was ALWAYS taken, much to the chagrin of the starving chorus girls and overworked crew who seldom had time for a proper break. At the Talk Of The Town it was served, white cloth, waiter in attendance, at one of the front tables. I was often invited to join him. If we were at the Palladium then lunch would be at *Verry’s*; if we were in the office, and he was in the mood to chat, we wandered over to *Sheekey’s* or the *Pastoria Hotel*. He was an entertaining host, a great raconteur and a fund of knowledge.

Two further stories concerning Mr. N. spring to mind.

Some of the girls had been admonished by Billy Petch for putting on a few pounds. They made the fatal mistake of putting a box of chocolates on one of the tables and helping themselves between rehearsals. No comment was made by Mr. Nesbitt. He went out to lunch and came back, clutching a large brown paper bag. He walked down to the dancers and said, “Now, how are my long stemmed roses?” They all looked up and smiled and said they were fine and had a little chat. Would he, perhaps, like one of their chocolates? Well, actually, no, he wouldn’t. He then pounced upon the box and triumphantly opened the brown paper bag spilling the contents, which were several pairs of rather expensive tights. “I am taking the chocolates,” he said. “Beautiful roses like you should not be eating them, but, in return, you may have these lovely tights for your beautiful legs.” Robert Nesbitt: 1 - Girls: 0.

The scene is the Talk Of The Town late on Monday afternoon. Dorothy Squires is opening that evening as the headline cabaret. Mr. Nesbitt has spent the afternoon lighting her act. He clearly is not entirely happy and he goes up to her, puts his arm round her shoulder and says “Dorothy, darling, I really don’t think that song is the right choice for the act.” “Well,” flounces Miss Squires, “I don’t care what you think, it stays in.” More persuasion from Mr. N.; more stubborn behaviour from the star. “Well, darling,” says Mr. Nesbitt, “if you really must sing it may I suggest you sing it in the taxi on the way home!”

Maybe I should have written in more detail about his accomplishments; some detailed information about how the shows were created, but maybe another time. This time I felt that the essence of the man was somehow more important and I can only hope that this has given a glimpse of someone who was unique, and, I am certain that, in an age of white hot

technology and number-crunching boardroom directors, his like will never be seen again.

.....and finally:

Rehearsals are in full swing for *Aladdin And The Wonderful Lamp* at the Palladium. There is a lull on stage and several stage hands bring on a brand new shiny drum kit. It is set up centre stage for the delectation of the star, Norman Wisdom, who apparently wants to include a drum solo during the show in his role of *Aladdin* (no, me neither!). However, Mr. Wisdom is nowhere to be seen. Suddenly a tall

figure wearing the trademark Savile Row suit, handmade shirt and shoes rises from his seat at the production desk and walks purposefully down the aisle to the stage. He clambers up and sits at the drum kit. Everyone carries on with what they are doing. The man now seated at the drums takes off his jacket and drapes it on a piece of scenery; he jams a cigarette in the corner of his mouth, loosens his tie and undoes the top button of his shirt and starts to drum. Slowly, everyone stops what they are doing to watch and there is total silence in the theatre. The drum solo continues apace for about five minutes and reaches what may only

be described as one helluva crescendo! The drum solo stops, the drummer does up the shirt button, puts the tie back where it should be, slips on his jacket, stubs out the cigarette and walks elegantly back to his seat in the stalls. He picks up his microphone and asks if everyone is now ready to carry on with the rehearsal! Meet Robert Nesbitt – frustrated drummer. Oh, I forgot to say – there was a HUGE round of applause from everyone in the theatre - stagehands, electricians, props, cast. Well, there was once they had got over the shock of what they had just seen!