

WALTHON AND DORRAINE

Suzanne Neath looks back over her parents' career



Walthon and Dorraine

My father, Walter Skupinski, started his variety career by training as an acrobat with his partner May. As Walthon and May they performed an amazing feat which entailed May jumping onto a small trampoline (18" square), flying high into the air and landing head to head - without touching hands! Not something I've ever seen anyone even attempt

Walthon & May travelled from Germany to Australia just before the war in 1937 and worked there only a short while before the outbreak of hostilities. Dad was interred as a "hostile alien" whilst May travelled back to Germany. After a period of good behaviour Walthon was allowed to work for the Wirth Circus where he learned to

juggle, lion tame and ride dancing horses - in fact everything to do with the circus. He had already met my mother on a blind date by this time. My mother, Dorothy Riakards, born in London, but brought up in Australia, tried various careers such as nursing, secretarial and modelling before becoming interested in magic. She even became a member of the Magic Circle and took the stage name of Dorraine, later Dorraine.

They married in Sydney in 1940, developed a comedy balancing and juggling act and Walthon and Dorraine were born. Walthon would throw down a plank of wood onto a roller, on a 3ft square, 4ft high table, leap on top and begin by rolling vigorously to the tune *In the Mood*. Beginning with three clubs, he

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then juggled a variety of objects such as bowler hats, a complicated assortment of rings and balls in both hands whilst balancing stuff on a mouthpiece. My mother would stand on his shoulders for one trick and finally he skipped, blindfolded, using a semi rigid hoop, on the roller. Just try skipping blindfold, never mind on a free moving board on a roller! He made a deliberate prat fall every night, which was quite spectacular and could be very dangerous. He often suffered blackened and sprained ankles and once, in Kenya, several fractured ribs - but the show always went on! Adrenalin has a lot to answer for! He had a breast pocket full of medals and when he completed a difficult trick he would wink and pull out a medal, than if he missed something, wag his finger and replace one, or all!

They enjoyed much success working the Tivoli Circuit in Australia, where I was born, and in New Zealand and then in 1950 made the long boat trip to Britain. Here they signed for Lew & Leslie Grade and toured the Moss Empire circuit appearing with such stars as Laurel & Hardy (Glasgow), Max Miller (Liverpool), Kay Starr at the London Palladium (in August 1953) and Dean Martin & Jerry Lewis (Glasgow, again). In fact Jerry gave me a beautiful doll for my 5th birthday when we were there. We travelled the whole country with Dad driving a huge shooting brake stacked with props and me asleep on top and pulling an 18ft caravan, which was our home. We stayed mainly in farmers' fields or car parks. Once Semprini, the pianist, accidentally drove his huge truck, which housed his grand piano (for practice!) over my tortoise! Luckily the ground was soft and the animal lived for many more years after we extracted him from the soil.

They appeared with Billy Cotton, Dr. Crock and his Crackpots, Dickie Valentine, Norman Vaughan, Betty Driver, David Whitfield, Lita Roza, Alma Cogan (I used to straighten her skirts before she went on), Wilson, Keppel & Betty, Eddie Gordon & Nancy, Vic Oliver, George Formby - so, so many brilliant stars of the day. I also remember Morecambe & Wise appeared on a bill - beneath my parents! They were just starting out and they and Dad had a long running gag - whoever went on first and got a good reception would cock their thumb and say "Follow THAT!" to the other.

My parents also appeared with a very young Shirley

Bassey. I remember the stagehands always paid her the compliment of watching every night. This was most unusual as they usually went off to play cards or whatever after the first few shows, but she was such a professional. Dad also used to win quite a lot of money at cards from Guy Mitchell after shows in his hotel room.

My mother died quite suddenly in January 1967, and, whilst I had never intended going into variety, I had attended ballet classes and could dance a bit, so when my father asked me to join him for a contract in Teheran, saying it was just for a few months and I would see the world, I agreed. We toured the whole of South East Asia for four years, ending up in Vietnam when Dad decided to return to England and our house. All this he did when he was over sixty and it is only now, when I am that age that I fully appreciate just how very remarkable he was doing that type of act, particularly at that time of life.

In 1982 he became ill with leukaemia and I returned home to look after him until his death in 1984.

When recently I was told that if I "Googled" Walthon & Dorraine I would get a hit - I was just so amazed! Boy, would that have made my father proud - as indeed it has me!

