

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

<http://sounds.bl.uk>

## Mavis Whyte – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Helen Temple**

**5 January 2005**

Performer with the Entertainments National Service Association on working in Variety and Revue acts in the forties, fifties and sixties; memories of Bert Loman, Frank Fortescue; variety acts and performers.

HT: To begin with, I would be delighted if you could tell us about the ENSA work you did in the war effort.

MW: Yes well that was one year I volunteered to go abroad for ENSA, Entertainments National Service Association and it was about 1944, yes, I think that was it. We were following to entertain the troops that were left behind. We followed the Eighth Army actually. We went down on a troop ship, just a group of us, and it was an ENSA show, and Spike Milligan said that ENSA stood for 'Every Night Something Awful'! But anyway I got into it, and the troops were very glad. I think the thing was that we were people from home. We had come out especially for them, and it was important. All the questions they asked were 'where do you come from?' and 'what was happening before you left?' and all that kind of thing and 'when did you get your mail last?' because the mail was very important, to get a letter out there and it was the same. They called me Tiddlywinky because I sang a cute little song called 'Tiddlywinky-woo' and afterwards they would say 'Hey Tiddlywinky, here Tiddlywinky! Where have you come from?' and all that. Then when we moved to entertain the Americans it was the same, one said [in an American accent] 'Hey Tiddlywinky, have you ever met one of those genuine Arabs? Well you better be careful of those fellas, because they'll steal the sugar out of your coffee before it's stirred up.' So we met all of these personalities. From North Africa we went to Sicily, Italy and Malta, and in Italy we met lots of personalities such as Billy Russell. He was watching me and he said, 'You know, you should be an Irish comedian', because being an impressionist I very quickly picked up dialects. I said 'I don't want to be an Irish comedian, I want to be Tiddlywinky, [in an Irish accent] but at the same time I like telling a little Irish story. So I'll tell you one now whether you like it or not! We're driving along in the car and I had my little friend Nelly by me side, and a lorry passed by with all these little turfs of grass on it. And she said 'Isn't that lovely? Now that's what I'd like to do if I had plenty of money.' I said 'What's that, Nelly?' and she said 'If I had all the money in the world I'd send my grass away to be cut.!' So perhaps I should have gone in for the Irish, but a lot of other personalities came into it. So that was my work, impersonating, giving people my impression of stars like Shirley Temple and Jessie Matthews, the English film star and Marlene Dietrich and Gracie Fields. I met the American Mae West [in an American accent] 'Oh, look me over boys, but don't try to reform me.' and so there are more, but the modern ones today they aren't too individual. They all had individual acts and individual speech, and I've always been

interested in that. Today we have Mrs. Bucket 'Mrs. Bouquet, if you don't mind', but it's hard to find individual voices now compared with then. So after the war I went into revue and I worked with all the famous stars like Max Miller, and I used to stand in the wings watching and learning all the time. Then I went into cabaret in the West End of London, and it was there that my husband saw me. From one of the pantomimes I invited him to come along there and he said, 'You shouldn't be here' and he put me into revue, and from there I went into pantomime. There was always pantomime every year, he had his own pantomimes. He was called Bert Loman, theatrical impresario and pantomime producer. He was older than me, and he actually - before my time - put George Formby into pantomime. And George Formby couldn't get any work, and he was a very funny man apparently. And his mother said to my Bertie, 'The silly idiot wants to be a car mechanic' because he was mad about motorbikes and cars and he couldn't get any work, and Bertie said 'I'll put him into pantomime.' He went into pantomime at Manchester, Basil Dean saw him and he went into films and the rest is history. His films are still funny today, but I never met the man. But Bert Lowman was the wittiest man I ever met and he was the one man I couldn't live without, so I married him. We came to live on the Wirral, and of course we're getting into the fifties now.

HT: I remember you saying in a recent telephone conversation that we had, that you felt that a lot is said about Pinter and Beckett

MW: Oh the legitimate theatre! What about the illegitimate ones! Well I think that show business has changed tremendously, because of computerisation. We now have spectacles in the theatre. They can do absolutely marvelous things. Lighting, that has changed dramatically. The travelling has changed, because we all got cars in the sixties and some in the fifties, and so we didn't do any long train journeys. Journeys in the early days used to take all day, our journeys were long, but when we could get our own cars we could cross the country in a few hours instead of taking a whole day. So the motorways transformed showbusiness I think. All this new technology, computerisation that altered theatre in the way that they did things. I went into a show in New Brighton, that was a summer show, that was in 1958, when we came to live on the Wirral and it was there that we introduced an act called 'The Two Julies'. With Peggy Naylor that was Jackson Earle's wife.

HT: Was Jackson Earle the director?

MW: He was the producer of Melody Inn and it was quite a famous show. People would come from miles away to see this wonderful show every year. He started in 1948 and he died in 1971 and New Brighton was never quite the same without Jackson Earle and his Summer Revue. It was really like musical rep, because we had to change to do six shows in a season, fourteen to sixteen weeks and it was very hard work. They don't have things like that now; they have more resident shows at Blackpool. Only the bigger theatres do the long season summer shows and a lot of the variety artists are now working on cruises, because the theatres are not there for them. The theatres are taken up with the big musicals like Cats.

HT: You said also before we started the interview that you felt that the theatre after the war was very much about making people want to laugh. You said that that was really at the heart of theatre.

MW: Well, I think that even during the war and always, people have wanted laughter, that's why they sent shows abroad to help the troops to recover. You have got to have laughter to complement the tragedy in life. It's very important and we have had some very important people like Morecambe and Wise, Tommy Cooper and Ken Dodd, people like that, they keep the nation laughing. Unfortunately it's a dying business, because the humour today, you can put these older stars on and they're still fresh and new because they have a personality to offer. Whereas some of the new ones, there isn't the grounding there. The theatres are not there for learning.

HT: You said also that during the fifties and sixties you were involved in your husband's pantomimes. Could you tell me a little bit about them, and what the audiences were like for whom you catered for?

MW: We catered for children. To please the children you please the grown-ups and they were absolutely marvelous. You didn't have to have star names in those days: as long as you followed the story line and gave them a lot of laughter in it and visual comedy, the people liked it. Theatres were usually booked out as soon as you said you were going, we went to the same places all the time and we had a reputation and they knew that they would have a good family show without any smut in it, they were very clean. The Chamberlain... was it the Lord Chamberlain? Somebody had to pass all the scripts and we weren't allowed to say 'bloody' it had to be 'ruddy' and things like that. So that has dramatically changed in these latter years. I'm quite horrified at some of the... I don't like this realistic theatre very much. I don't like it, perhaps I'm old-fashioned. It was rather nice in those days there was a nice standard.

HT: You mentioned about the Lord Chamberlain, did censorship ever have a big impact on your work?

MW: Not our work, because Jackson Earle did a family show. His Revue, his summer show, anybody could go to. He catered for families and he did not allow any bad words in it at all. It wasn't boring because it was funny, the comedians could be funny. For instance, my brother is in a Rotary Club, and they hired some comedian to go, and this so called comedian said, 'I'm sorry but I don't know if I can do much of an act because I have been told not to swear', and I think that that's sad, and he couldn't - he was absolutely stumped. But thank goodness there are still some good ones and we have memories of the big stars, and we can always see them on television on repeats. The repeats are so good, they're still good today because they are solid entertainment. The Two Ronnies for instance. Ronnie Barker is terrific for writing material. I can sometimes watch a sitcom and I just can't get a laugh out of it, maybe it's because I'm old, I don't know.

HT: You spoke about when you were in pantomime and being very young in theatre and you talked about being Cinderella. Could you tell me a little bit more about that, and how you approached the role?

MW: Yes, I lived the part. I didn't play Cinderella, I was Cinderella, and that is it. I think if you are acting anything you have to get inside the character and become that person and sometimes some people can only do it with props, like with a wig on. If I put a long Goldilocks wig on I could be Goldilocks, or Aladdin I was Aladdin. If you feel, really feel the part... Old Mother Riley, for instance. Arthur Lucan had a young understudy called Roy Roland and when Arthur died he carried on as Old Mother Riley and I said, 'Roy, you are so funny. You don't need to wear the old woman's wig and shawl to be funny' and he said 'I couldn't be funny without the outfit on, as soon as I wear it, I become the Old Mother Riley character.' I had bare feet for my Cinderella, and I felt poor and I felt really really frightened of the ugly sisters - terrified of them. Really I lived it. I think that's the secret of getting inside acting. Well that's my secret, but what am I? I'm not a legitimate actor; I'm just the other musical side really.

HT: Well I think it's a very important element of theatre, and it's very under-researched I suppose, wouldn't you say? Especially considering the audiences you played to throughout these times.

MW: Yes and the experience, you can't take away experience. And I suppose I'm lucky to be able to help research.

HT: You mentioned at your time at the Floral Pavilion you began a double act with your friend Peggy Naylor. Could you tell me a little bit more about that?

MV: Well we thought, 'Well, let us burlesque the teenagers' and that's what we did. We burlesqued the teenagers. In the sixties there were outrageous teenagers: they wore mini skirts and beehive hairstyles, and so we had wigs made of beehive hairstyles and our mini skirts were mini-er than mini! And we'd be different characters, sometimes Lollipop Ladies or sometimes we were just The Teenagers. We came onstage on a scooter and there was a scooter song. We sang all the pop songs and I would come onstage and say [in a Liverpool accent] 'Actually is my hair alright. I come from Liverpool; actually I used to be a nurse. I was a nurse in Birkenhead General and I was doing alright in nursing. There was this fella in bed and he said 'Nurse' he said 'Give us a kiss' and I said 'No! I can't.' He says 'Go on! Give us a kiss!' and I says 'No I can't! I shouldn't really be in the same bed as you! So I had to go, you know, got the sack. I told me friend, Oh! You'd like Vera. Oh! We went in the lift in Lewis's, we were in Lewis's, we had a day out Vera and me. We got in the lift and it went zoom! Right up to the top. When we got out the lift man looked at her and said 'Did I frighten you?' she says 'Oh no I'm used to wearing my drawers around my ankles!!' People today laugh and I did those stories years ago. And the favourite one, would you like to hear the favourite one?

HT: Yes please do.

MW: [in a Liverpool accent] 'Actually this Vera, she wears all the latest fashions. I saw her walking down the street and she was wearing half a topless. Half a topless! This side was alright, but this side: Oh la la! I said 'Eh, Vera what you walking down the street like that for?' She looked down and said 'Oh my God! I must have left the baby on the bus!'' So that was my favourite one.

HT: So you worked as a duo then?

MW: Yes, yes, Peggy would be feeding me, but I've had to change it to a one man show now because Peggy is no longer with us. Still, I find that the material that I used in the fifties and sixties is fresh as a daisy today. They haven't heard it, but they have heard of it and I find that the younger audiences even like it because they hear all the different voices. All my voices are different.

HT: So the show that you did with Peggy then, was that a regular thing?

MW: We did it every week, yes. Once we started we had to find new material all the time, so it was quite hard work. As I said of musical rep, we rehearsed in the mornings from 10:30 till 1pm. Then we had the afternoon off, but that afternoon we're thinking of all that we have to learn. Then we did twice nightly at night, 6:30 and 8:40. So it was a long day, but they were wonderful days. We preferred to do more than less. If we were asked to do an extra song then 'Oh yes! Lovely' not 'How much?'. That is the difference I think. But it's a different world today and I think that there are some brilliant shows today, but we've moved on. I've told we've moved on with the motorways, and the computers definitely have changed theatre, the special effects they can achieve its magic. I think in your project you should bring in the variety theatre and the music halls because it's a big part of show business.

HT: Could you describe to me the sort of things that would be included in a variety show in the fifties and sixties?

MW: In the fifties and sixties everybody had their own style. Nobody did the same thing. I was once on the bill with Tommy Cooper. He did his comedy magic. He was a very big man, and he just had a very funny face which just made people laugh. He was Tommy Cooper, he wasn't somebody trying to be funny, and his comedy he would make it wrong, as though he'd made a mistake... it was all very, very well-rehearsed. Then you had Frankie Howerd who was a different style all together, he just had to say 'oh' in a certain way and it was Frankie Howerd. Then you had Benny Hill with all his limericks and his cheeky laugh. He was a different personality. Max Miller was considered very blue, but I'm sure if you heard a tape of Max Miller now you'd think how mild he is. A variety bill meant a variety of acts. Every act was different. I very often would be the only girl in the show. Or they might have a singer and I would do impressions and a bit of comedy. They went more for the men, I don't know why it was, but the girls were considered more as singers than anything else. You did have your impressionists like Beryl Ward. They would often have a troop of dancers to open the show, all these lovely legs, and nobody else on the bill was like them. Then you would have your first comic who would have to warm up the audience and he would work very hard. Variety really

was variety, you may have a juggling act or an acrobatic act, a magician perhaps and comedy and impressionists. Usually about eight acts. You'd always have your dancing girls and that was a curious thing, when Equity came into it and dancers had to join Equity: whether they were good bad or indifferent, as an Equity member they were entitled to the Equity money. Which I always thought was a bit unfair. When Equity demanded that there must be a certain standard of wages, the little man in the touring theatres, he had to cut his staff down. So instead of having eight dancers he had to have six, then he had to have four. It was the same with orchestras, there were many orchestras in the provinces, and they did it because they loved the business. At New Brighton for instance there was an orchestra of local musicians who'd been in the show business, retired but they were living at home and they could still play. A conductor came along and said, 'You've got to join the musician's union, or I can't play with you.' And they rebelled and said, 'Well, we're not' and they gave up. So in the end you now get one orchestra one musician can play all the effects on his organ and a drummer and that cuts out a whole orchestra. It's all changed, except when you see these beautiful symphony orchestras. And also the stars people like Frank Sinatra when they came over from America brought these big orchestras. There's nothing nicer than to be accompanied by a great big orchestra. It was a luxury in many variety theatres.

HT: You mentioned Equity, how did affect you as a performer?

MW: Well, it didn't affect me at all, because I had no need to become... I did become a member of Equity when I went abroad for CSE for Hughie Green when we did television. We had to be a member to do the work. Today you have to be a professional to get your Equity card; it's a bit harder to get it now. After my husband died, I changed into a French act called Marie-Louise and I became [in French accent] a French artiste. I spoke English with a French accent, and I employed dancers for my cabaret. We did a season in Anglesey and because they did a season with me, they were able to claim an Equity card.

HT: You mentioned earlier about the serious theatre being the legitimate side and this musical theatre being its illegitimate counterpart.

MW: We called ourselves illegitimate but we were actually the professionals. We served our apprenticeship in the theatre for years. We were learning all the time how to make people laugh. Every play that you go to, you get a different reaction from laughter.

HT: Did you ever get the chance to see any of what you have called the legitimate theatre?

MW: No, I didn't, because I was working all the time. But I have seen a lot of televised versions and I think the standard of acting is very high.

HT: Going back to your days with Peggy Naylor, in the early sixties at the Floral Pavilion. Other than your show, what other sort of things were going on at that theatre?

MW: Well, always summer shows, you had Butlins camps, they came into it. Lots of artists entertained in Butlins camps. I did a season with Terry Scott and Bill Maynard in the Skegness Butlins camp before they were big stars. We were learning, we were learning all the time. We were the professionals and then there were the Redcoats who had to organise all the games and things. A lot of comedians progressed from being Redcoats but they were watching the professionals and learning their trade.

HT: Did the Floral Pavilion only do shows in the summer?

MW: No, they would do shows in the winter but I would be somewhere else. I would be touring.

HT: Were the shows always variety and pantomime?

MW: I think you'd have to ask Mr. Holliday that. I can't help you with that. But they would have musical theatre and then they would have plays. There was a man called Frank Fortescue and his players. They went to different theatres with there plays.

HT: Frank Fortescue, what sort of productions did he put on?

MW: The old-fashioned type, like Sweeney Todd. Things like that, real drama as they called it then.

HT: So again this was a group of people that stayed together and performed together in different plays?

MW: Yes, indeed, we used to follow them; with musicals into digs because they were straight actors and they were different to musical, variety people. But the landladies would say 'Eh, that Rex Harrison, he was here, he slept in that bed you know, that Rex Harrison. Oh, he was a bit of a lad! Oh I tell you! The girls were after him!' It was very interesting to hear about these straight players you know. They were straight and we were not. Sometimes we could see a matinee they did, they never saw us because we didn't do matinees, we only did twice nightly.

HT: You sometimes saw their plays? Did you enjoy them?

MW: Oh yes, wonderful!

HT: Did you see Sweeney Todd?

MW: I didn't see that, no, no. A lot of star names started in repertory, serious acting in small groups working for nothing and trying to borrow clothes to play the parts. I don't know it, because I wasn't in it, but I know about it. It was going on in the forties, fifties and sixties, and a lot of the stars like Ronnie Barker, he was in repertory. That's why he's such a good actor because he served his time. He knows what he's doing.

HT: Almost like an apprentice?

MW: Yes that's exactly it an apprenticeship. A lot of the stars were in rep and a lot of stars came from gang shows and ENSA shows. If you search back for the comedy side you'll find a lot of the stars started then.