

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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## Audrey Mathers – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Alison Norden**

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Daughter of theatre boarding house owner. Gus Aubury; Hylda Baker; Roy Castle; changing demands affecting theatre; chorus girls; Elsie Dibbs; digs; Kay Dotrice; Roy Dotrice; George Formby; home life; television; Theatre Royal, Castleford; variety.

AN: The Royal Theatre in Castleford was host to Variety Shows it seems. What kind of performances did these involve, Variety Shows?

AM: Well, just variety, and they went on to plays - just general, and of course pantomimes, Christmas, you know... just everything in general.

AN: Singing, dancing?

AM: Yes, singing, dancing, everything, you know, playing instruments, just general variety!

AN: Was it very accessible to most of the public then, could most people afford it...

AM: Oh yes.

AN: ... and enjoy it?

AM: It was not very expensive to go to the Theatre Royal. It was not a very posh place, so the prices were pretty reasonable for people to go anyway.

AN: So your mother, Elsie Dibbs, ran a theatrical boarding house on Perseverance Street, number six - why did she decide to accommodate performers and who in particular?

AM: Mum never worked, she always stayed at home, and her mum died early, and so she looked after her dad, and they had a big family - Mum was youngest of thirteen. And so she decided to get this house and take people in from the theatre because she had never worked, unless, you know, only at home, and she just wanted to earn some

money, but she did not want to go out to work. And so of course there were five of us... I was next to the youngest, my brother was three years younger than me, so he would only be about one when we moved, and so she could look after us and do something as well.

AN: Were the rest of your family very happy to have actors, actresses staying in the house?

AM: Oh yes, because there was always something different coming in each week.

AN: Which performers do you remember in particular staying in the house?

AM: I remember quite a few people, you know, I mean we used to have the chorus girls in - when it was Snow White and The Seven Dwarfs, with the seven dwarfs in... shall I tell you a little story about that?

AN: Yes.

AM: Well, the dwarfs were obviously very tiny, Mum was not very big, but in those days the toilet was up on the wall, with a long handle down. Well they could not reach it, so they put some string round it so that they could flush the toilet, and Dad came in one day and said, 'Who's puts some string on the toilet?!'. You know, they had because they could not reach the toilet, you know [laughs]. And then once they - we used to have all the chorus girls, it was a massive front room, and there was like a little anteroom at the side, and of course they had not got very much money so they, and so all the seven girls, all the chorus girls, slept in this one room, and Dad went up to put some coal in the coal scuttle, and there was one of them walking about absolutely stark naked. Dad just took one look, put the bucket down and flew! [Laughs]

AN: Did people feel very at ease in your house then?

AM: Yes. I think they were so... it was the comfort of the house that Mum gave them, that they, you know.... As I say coal fires, a lot of people did not have coal fires and warmth in a room, you know, so of course that was a comfort.

AN: Did she provide a lot of empathy for the actors, was it very close-knit, friendly?

AM: Yes. Well, as soon as they saw the environment, everything was friendly. It was very rare that you got anyone that was absolutely miserable. And Sweeney Todd, he used to bring all his knives home - Sweeney Todd The Demon Barber - and Mum used to put him a little table just inside the room, and he would have all his knives out, and he used to sharpen them, you know. [Laughs]

AN: Did they... I mean, obviously coming home at the end of the day, did any of the actors seem emotionally stressed, or were they just very happy to be in?

AM: No. I think our house sort of made them feel at home. You know, Mum used to cook for them, they had very little money, a lot of them, and so the comforts of Mum baking - she was always baking - and they thought it was great.

AN: What was the longest time a particular performer stayed with you?

AM: Well, they mostly only stayed for a week, or a fortnight. The only time was when the plays were on, and Roy Dotrice, do you know Roy Dotrice?

AN: Yes, did his family, stay with you as well?

AM: Roy Dotrice, his wife Kay, she does not do anything now, but Michele Dotrice, she has been in a lot of things and she is married to Edward Woodward. She was only very tiny, they only had her when they stayed at our house, and all our clothes she wore them on stage, every week, you know, [laughs] she would say, 'What have you got?' - all our clothes were on stage every week - she borrowed our clothes, you know. And we used to look after Michele while they went to the theatre.

AN: The child. Did the actors, did they bring their work home, as in, did they spend a lot of time learning scripts and rehearsing in your house?

AM: Not a lot because they used to go... well, they did sometimes, but most of it was done at the theatre. But Kay and Roy, they had a different play every week, so what they did, we used to look after Michele, on a Saturday or Sunday I cannot remember what day it was, and they just used to stay in the bedroom, and they knew the play. It was a different play every week, and they used to stay in that bedroom till they were word perfect, and that was it they used to go on stage. They were absolute professionals, you know, they knew, as I say it was a different play every week. So you know, they were brilliant!

AN: Did you... Did your mother ever have any active involvement in this sort of theatre? Would you improvise with them in the house a bit?

AM: No.

AN: Were any performances put on in your house, for you at all at times?

AM: No. It was all at the theatre. I think they were so happy to be in our house that, you know, they just wanted to be homely. [Laughs]

AN: Did you get to go backstage?

AM: No. Well, us girls were not very much allowed. If my eldest brother had been alive now you could have got more out of him because he was allowed to go, you know. In those days it was not the thing for young girls to go backstage, you know, and we were only young, you know, so we did not go backstage, and neither did my youngest brother either. But as I say my eldest brother, he would have told you quite a lot.

AN: Did you used to run a lot of errands between the house and the theatre?

AM: Oh yes, we used to run errands, yes. Do you want me to tell you about the coffee, tea?

AN: Yes, any stories!

AM: No, I told you before about the tea and the coffee. When it was the interval, I was quite often sent to the theatre, and go backstage - because there was no electricity - and take a flask and sandwiches or something, soup or something, you know, and they were very grateful for it, you know, because it was not very warm down there or anything, because they were downstairs. What you would call the cellar was the changing rooms, you know - they are changing rooms are they not...?

AN: Yes. Was it a novelty for like, local people to have these actors as part of the community?

AM: I think a lot of people did because even though it was only a sort of... I do not know if you call it a third rate theatre, I do not know. People did like to think that they had seen someone who they thought was a bit bigger like, you know, like Roy Castle. Roy Castle stayed at my Mum's house a few times, when he was very young and his Mum used to come with him when he was younger, and of course when - they have got to be sixteen - they had to have a chaperone up to being sixteen, and then he came on his own.

AN: Is he called the Brilliant Boy Wonder, is it? Roy Castle?

AM: Yes because he could play quite a few instruments, you know, and I do not remember an awful lot about him because... I was not really interested in them, you know. It was nice, Gus Aubrey was a very nice person, but Roy Castle I can remember him coming as though it was yesterday, you know, because he was a very nice person. When Mum was - what would she be? - 80, I rang him up, found out from him, from the Guinness Book of Records, and wrote to him, and he rung Mum on her birthday. When you have a look at some of the things - photographs - his Mum is holding the phone as though she is talking to him, you know, but she was so thrilled about that

because, and then, I do not think it was all that long before he died that. So she was thrilled to pieces about it.

AN: You mentioned Gus Aubury as a female impersonator...

AM: He was a lovely person. I do not know if you know any gay people? I think he was about the first... I did not know the meaning of a gay person, I think, until he came, and then when he came he was such a lovely person, you know, and he thought the world of my Mum, he really did, you know, and he used to bring her things. And he was good out town, and you know, he would say, 'I will have a steak for my dinner and I brought you one', you know, and things like that. And he always gave us something when he left. He came a few times, I cannot remember how many times, because when you are that young, I do not think things register that could be important later on, do they? You know, but Hylde Baker, I can remember her coming so many times, you know, and it really hurt when my brother-in-law asked her if she remembered coming and she said, 'No, I never came here', and that was really, you know, really bold to kick in, pardon the expression, up the backside, if you know what I mean, to think that she had been so many times.

AN: She used to bring her dog, did she not?

AM: Yes, a little... She always had a Pekinese - of course all the years she must have had a few Pekinese - all the years that she came, you know. But her long fur coats were... whether they were real or not I do not know but I would not know at that age would I?! [laughs] But she was a real character in the house as well as on stage, you know, she brought it home with her, the character, you know.

AN: Was she characterised on stage as kind of, sort of gossiping kind of person, very [inaudible], and she brought that home?

AM: Yes she brought that home, and she treated us as her family, you know, like you go home talk to your brother, your sister, to your mum, your dad. She would come home and talk like that just as though, you know, she was one of the family.

AN: Do you think many of the actors and actresses kind of, sort of took on their stage role, like their character on stage, do you feel that was them also off stage?

AM: No. I do not think so. I think they left it at the theatre, you know, coming home was different because as I say, for most of them it was coming home from home, you know, they really did feel at home. You know, because my Mum treated them... They very rarely saw my Dad because he was on regular nights, you know, and he did not come home in the morning and by the time he got up they were at theatre. He did not see an awful lot of them.

AN: Were there any other performers? George Formby, was he very familiar?

AM: I cannot remember. No. That must have been really early on because he sort of got, into films then and I think after, when he left Castleford I think he sort of, started going up and up, and then got on to really big stage, and then on to films, you know. And so, I cannot remember... He must have been pretty early on, George Formby. As I say I was not really interested because I mean, as I say I would be four when they sort of started coming I mean, what do you remember when you are four years old about people, you know.

AN: Did you get to see many of the performances in the theatre at all?

AM: No. Mum did not like us going to the theatre at all, the girls. The boys did, but, no, us girls were not, no.

AN: Why was that particularly?

AM: I do not know. I think Mum thought that it was not the place for us to go - unless we were accompanied of course - but I mean, I was never really interested in the theatre, you know.

AN: At the time, did any of the plays, did they bring in taboo subjects maybe, or subjects that were current at the time, or was it just purely entertainment value really?

AM: No. They sort of did not do that. I tell you what they used to do. They used to bring all the make-up home, plaster it on us, and then my Dad would come in and say, 'what you got that on for?', you know. [Laughs] But it was lovely, when they made you up, you know, with all this pancake because - have you ever seen any of it?

AN: No I have not.

AM: No. Well, it was sort of like a thick pencil and you just rubbed it on you, you know, and it really stood out, you know, it is not like make-up of today, really plastered on, you know. We used to like that. [Laughs]

AN: Your brothers, did they run errands as well?

AM: Oh yes. Colin used to go to the station on a Saturday when they came, and he had this sort of little wheel-barrow-cum-pram thing like, you know, and he used to pick the luggage up from the station and bring it home. The station was not very far. Have you come on the train?

AN: Yes.

AM: Ah well, when you come on the train it is more or less from the station, if you sort of more or less walk straight down... did you see the bus station when you came out of the station?

AN: Yes.

AM: When you came out it was a little to your left hand side. Well, it was the entrance to the station and Perseverance Street was straight opposite there. So it was not very far, you know, to walk.

AN: With this sort of, variety shows, plays, I mean, do you feel this is typical of theatre through the forties, fifties, sixties?

AM: Oh yes, it was typical... As I say, I am not saying Castleford theatre was a third rate but it was sort of real amateur things, you know, it was only occasionally that you got someone who could really do something with whatever they were doing, if you know what I mean? And then of course the pantomimes at Christmas, they were great, they were always full for them because all children love pantomimes do they not? [Laughs]

AN: Here, being used to variety shows and plays, were you very aware of the 1950s: new wave drama, kitchen sink drama coming in, like John Osborne's plays, and Harold Pinter - were people, kind of, in awe of that?

AM: I am not sure what kind of plays they were when they started doing them, but I think Kay and Roy were a bit well known before they came to Castleford, and then being in Castleford and doing all those for well over a year, they stayed at our house. Then they seemed to get things from other places, and then Kay did not get much because she only had one eye, she had a glass eye. But Roy, I mean he was a fantastic play, you know Roy Dotrice do you not?

AN: Yes. Well, vaguely, sort of I have an idea about him.

AM: Yes. Well, he has always been the same, and as I say, remember, that could remember the lines you know. He was absolutely fantastic. And then of course, being in the theatre, all the girls, you know, took after them, you know, as I say, Michelle Dotrice, and then her sister, I cannot think of her name now... but her sister, she has been in a few films as well. Because I think they went to live in America, and I think they all live down south now, and they all took to the theatre very easy like, you know, as I say they had a good teacher with their Mum and Dad.

AN: Kitchen Sink Drama... it is theatre that looked at social issues at the time, reflecting kind of a working class life. Do...

AM: No. They were just plays, you know, all different kinds of plays, murder and everything like, you know, different plays every week, but they were just plays. I do not think that they were anything, sort of relating to anything, you know, just a different play.

AN: What would you think attracted the audiences to the plays, or do you think it was just entertainment?

AM: Just entertainment, something different, and of course being a different play each week, a lot of people were interested, and they had some good audiences.

AN: Do you think people would have preferred socially realistic plays?

AM: I think musicals were going out a little bit then, and sort of, theatre... at - were sort of different, and, going out of fashion I think, you know. And that is why they put plays on, I do not think they were... with it being such a small place, Castleford, I think that was something to do with it as well, being - just as I say, I am sorry - third rate, type of things, and people did not want that. And then the plays came along and that was different.

AN: The Royal closed in 1955, do you think that is because the public had differing demands or wanted to see different things?

AM: I think it was a different demand. You know, I think they were a bit fed up of, sort of the old theatre, and wanted something different.

AN: Do you think television is partly to blame for that?

AM: Yes. Television was just sort of nice by then, I can remember, you know, because we did not have a television, but Kay and Roy had one, and it was sort of, you know, only the BBC 1, and I cannot remember, and ITV or something like that, I think there were only two programmes on then, you know, they sort of came later. But that is why I think it went out because they wanted something different in Castleford, you know, to this sort of, I do not know, Vaudeville thing.

AN: When you say television was brought to your house, did the actors and actresses bring luxury items sometimes?

AM: No. Not until they came because television was just coming in then, when Kay and Roy were at our house - and they did not have much money - they did not get paid very much, so they did not have very many luxuries unless they have some rich parents or something like that, you know. Instruments, yes, because I mean, Roy Castle had, you know, quite a few instruments, but he had been brought up with them, so of course I suppose his mother brought them, you know, when he started playing them and things like that. No. They did not have an awful lot of luxuries because if they had, they would not have been playing at Castleford.

AN: What sort of date was it that Kay and Roy had been staying at your house?

AM: Well, I would have been a teenager - thirteen, fourteen - I would say late forties, fifties when they came. I cannot think. As I say, I was a teenager.

AN: Do you think variety shows would be popular now, bearing in mind regional theatres are funded by the government and get subsidised tickets for younger people?

AM: I think a lot of them would be interested to see how it was done years ago because it would have to be something like a Vaudeville thing for, I mean, just ordinary acts like they are on television now... the sort of more or less, the stars are they not because they are on television, you know, and I do not think they would put up with something amateur dramatic, you know, I mean there are plenty of amateur dramatics around are there not, you know, [Laughs] and they are only once a year! [Laughs]

AN: Have you got any other memories that you would like to talk about? Anything else you would like to talk about?

AM: I cannot think. I ought to have done that did I not - wrote something down - we have talked about Hylda Baker lifting her clothes up have I? - when I told you that in there did I not, would you like me to put that on here?

AN: Yes

AM: Hylda Baker used to come into the kitchen, they would always come in the kitchen, you know, it was the best place to be, and she used to lift her clothes up, and warm her behind when she come in from theatre, and Mum would say, 'Harold will be in in a minute', 'Oh I am not bothered about him', you know, and she was not bothered about anything, not about anything. As I say she used to take her little Pekinese out every night, for a little walk, walk it along the wall and then when it had done its business come back in. [Laughs] And chorus girls were just chorus girls, we used to have a great time with them because they used to treat us as their family as well as we treat them as ours, you know, and we used to have some fun, you know - just inside the house, not outside. I do not think Mum let us take anything outside that, you know, friendship outside, it was OK in the house but I think what it was is that she did not want us to get into the idea that we could go on stage for something, you know, that was totally

different, you know, but as I say Roy Castle, he was very nice, and Gus Aubury was the greatest guy you could ever have, you know. But apart from that, not a lot really, you know, we just took each day as it came, and each sort of, people that came because they were all so totally different, you know. I mean some of them come with a little suit case and that was all the - and a change of clothes - that was all they had because they were used to doing just cheap rate theatres and they had not got much money - and as I say they used to give you the sweet coupons and meat coupons because they could not afford to buy it, you know, and if they gave use the meat coupons Mum would go and get some mince meat and make them a meat and potato pie or something like that, you know, shepherd's pie, and things like that, and they thought it was lovely. But as I say, you know, she treated them all as family, you know, it was very rare that she did not like anybody and it was usually a man if she did not like them! [Laughs] I think all the women got on fantastic really, you know.

AN: I think I read in one of Roy Hampson's articles that, with the actors that played the dwarfs in Snow White and The Seven Dwarfs, something about a snowball fight in the street?

AM: Oh yes. Yes, they used to enjoy themselves.

AN: They all got very much involved with everyone, and the community?

AM: Oh yes. That was different, you know, as I say they just treated us as family and we treat them as a family because, and there was no sort of jealousy in it because Mum used to say to us, look they are away from home, they have not got their parents with them, so you know just treat them as I treat you. I do not think there is anything else. Do you think there is anything else?

AN: No, I think that is OK. Well, thank you very much for the interview.