

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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## Sue Barbour – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Olivia Rye**

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Sue Barbour. Variety; Pantomime; Roy Barbour; Zip Goes a Million; The Astaires; still-dancing; marionettes; Stars in Battledress; Lew and Lesley Grade; Australia; Ed Sullivan Show; Arcadia Lowestoft; Michael Caine; Moss Empires; Alfred Marks; Cliff Richard and the Shadows; Adam Faith; Ted Rogers; Ruby Murray; Roy Castle; Little Tich; The Grumbleweeds; Billy Burden; Bob Pelham; Francis Laidler; Emile Littler; Ted Rogers.

OR: First of all I wanted to ask about your general background in Theatre.

SB: Well, I'm actually the fifth generation of a show business family; my great, great grandfather was a professional guitarist/musician. He was originally from London, but he ended up living in Sheffield because he married a girl from Sheffield who was also a professional guitarist/musician. They had my great grandfather who became, in those days, what was known as a light comedian, which meant that they told a few stories more than gags, and sang. And then my grandfather was a comedian, also from Sheffield, and he ended up becoming quite well known as a Northern comedian. He ran his own shows in Blackpool for seventeen seasons, he was in pantomime in Leeds and Bradford and places like that, and he also did a musical called Zip Goes a Million, which he took over from George Formby. He did the kind of world tour and went to Australia and New Zealand with that show.

My Grandmother was a performer; she was what was called a 'soubrette', which was a singer and dancer and she used to play principle boy and girl in pantomime – she was quite well known for playing Aladdin. She and my grandfather met, married and had three sons: my uncle; Roy Barbour Junior, my father; Peter; and my other uncle, Geoffrey... And my grandfather said to the three boys 'You need to get yourself a good speciality act', because as a comedian you are very restricted. Particularly, like, if you had a northern accent you tended to work in the North, and southern comedians were in the South. And he thought if you had a speciality act, which was an act where you did a special skill – you might be a juggler, a magician, trick cyclist and whatever – so he actually booked an act called 'The Astaires' who were staircase dancers who used to do tap dancing up and down stairs, and they walked on stilts a bit. And he said to them, I'll give you five pounds extra a week if you teach my sons to do the stuff that you can do... So my father, and his elder brother Roy (they had had tap dancing lessons) started to do this staircase dancing tapping up and down the stairs. And then they learnt the stilts, and my father had this bright idea of putting taps on the bottoms of the stilts, and he used to do tapping up and down the stairs, on the stilts – which I still find amazing, and I actually never saw that. But, basically, the three brothers did well as a speciality act dancing on the stilts, and appeared in the West End of London with Norman Wisdom in a show called Paris to Piccadilly.

While they were there, two things happened; my father decided, because they would get very out of breath, that they needed something to get their breath back, so he decided to have marionettes, which they worked from the stilts with the long strings. He went to see Bob Pelham of 'Pelham Puppets' and together they made these two- and three-foot-high marionettes. And during that time, while they were in the show I was actually born. My father had married my mother, obviously [laughs], Jean, who had been a singer. He met her during the war, because, obviously, when the war came all show business was interrupted unless you were not able to join the army. My father joined the army, the 11th Armoured Division and towards the end of the war he decided... his brother phoned him and said to him he was going to go into Stars in Battledress and he was asked to get a show together, and would my father join him. And at the time my Dad wasn't too thrilled because he had been doing entertainment in Germany and he had got a real... he'd got a theatre, he'd got a band, and he had really got it going well.

[Pause]

My father had been in Germany, the show that he'd got together included a big band and it was doing very well and he wasn't too keen on leaving it because he enjoyed doing it, and he was producing and directing the show and everything. Anyway, he came and he joined Stars in Battledress and my mother was the singer in the show, and basically he said to her; if we're to be together and the marriage is successful you need to really learn the act. But anyway, at the time she became pregnant so she obviously didn't learn to dance on stilts at that point. I was born and then when I was about eighteen months to two years old, she did learn the stilts and my youngest uncle, who was the third brother in the act The Barbour Brothers he didn't really like show business and he said he wanted to leave, so they trained up my mother and they did an audition for Lew and Lesley Grade – later, Lew Grade became Sir Lew Grade, and actually ran ATV television, he had the franchise for that. But originally he had been a dancing act, and was a charleston champion. Anyway he decided to become a theatrical agent, and my parents... the three brothers were working for him already, but he saw my mum and thought', hmmm that's quite a good idea, having a girl in the act'. So my mother joined the act and, of course, they immediately got work, and one of the first things they did was they got the Follies Bergere Tour that went to South Africa, so... At the time my parents had bought a house in Woodside Park in London, Finchley area, and my mother's uncle and aunt who had brought her up moved in and they lived in the house and they looked after me while my parents were working. And from that point on my mother worked the whole time. I stayed with them, and in that time my parents worked all over Britain, they did this tour of South Africa, and then they got a contract to appear in Australia.

My grandparents had been in Australia, as I said, my grandfather was in Zip Goes a Million in Australia, and he said, 'You'll never come back, if you go to Australia or New Zealand you will never come back, you will love it!'. So they sold the house in Woodside Park and I went with them to Australia. And of course, in those days, you didn't fly, you went by boat. It took six weeks and I can remember it pretty well; I was five or six years old in 1956, and... I obviously had a lot of fun on the boat. Anyway, when we got to Australia – they were working in Sydney – we rented a house of quite a well-known singer in Australia. It was on Bondi Beach, it was right on the beach. And to go to school I had to walk across the beach, and I used to walk on my own, and I think possibly with another little girl. But the first day, my mother sent me over with my shoes and socks and a handkerchief and everything and I came back without my socks, the first day. The second day I came back without my shoes and my mother asked me why, and I said 'because nobody wears shoes to go to school'. And what I can remember is the school: it

was on stilts and had a staircase up and we used to have our sandwiches at lunchtime actually on the steps of this sort of cabin-type school. My parents, in Australia, then went into an ice show called Spice and Ice, and all I can remember about that was, at one point – there seemed to be a cast of thousands, but maybe that's because I was little – but the skaters used to skate, and at one point they used to do an arabesque, which is when you put your one leg up high at the back, and one girl kicked her leg up and it went into the girl behind her's nose. She broke her nose and it was all bleeding everywhere. So of course, that's what you kind of remember, you know as a young child that was very impressive. Anyway we were there for a year, we went to Brisbane, and actually this past year I went back, and the schools still there and I found where we lived in Brisbane too, on Kangaroo Point.

We came back from Australia not particularly because my parents wanted to, but they had a contract – Lew and Lesley Grade had got them a contract in New York – so we came back to England and I went to a school run by The Actors' Church Union, which is still going strong. And basically, in those days, they had a –well they still do actually – Vicar in every town in the United Kingdom, or Great Britain rather, and when a show's on, The Actors' Church Union chaplain will come round, and they'll knock on the dressing room door, and ask 'Is everything alright? Can we do anything to help you?' But they had a school for children of people who worked in show business. And it was in Ealing, on Montpelier Road. Anyway, while my parents went, I think, to New York – I may be wrong – No they went to New York – They worked at The Latin Quarter which was a very exclusive nightclub. They worked there and they did the Ed Sullivan TV show which was very prestigious... the Beatles did their first performance in America on The Ed Sullivan Show. And that show was on every Saturday night for years. Ed Sullivan was a journalist, totally unsuitable for television. If you see footage of him now, it's hard to believe he was the Michael Parkinson of America, sort of thing. But on the program that they did, it was the first ever appearance of Maria Callas, the opera singer, and I think Cary Grant was on the show, and other people. Anyway, they did a very good television show, which I have on tape. An even I'm impressed! This nightclub was run by... this lady in America, I can't quite remember what her name was at the moment – Barbara Walters, it was her father. Barbara Walters is another Michael Parkinson of America, very good journalist presenter – anyway it was her father who ran the nightclub. Anyway they worked there, they came back from America to England, and went straight into pantomime, and basically what I remember about growing up is that I went to the Actors' Church Union School, there were a lot of children I remember that were from Bertram Mills' Circus, they were Coco the Clown's grandchildren, they were trapeze artist children, and that sort of thing.

In the holidays I went to wherever my parents were, and in those days it was the Moss Empire Variety circuit, for instance in Sheffield, there was the Empire – most of the theatres were called the 'Empires', or the 'Hippodromes', they were all over the country. And then of course, summer seasons and pantomimes which were during my holiday time. But during Easter it was usually the Moss Empire dates, so my geography was really good, because I'd basically spent my whole life travelling. On the holiday period my parents couldn't usually pick me up from school, because they were working, so, in those days it was quite safe for somebody to stick me on a train at one end, I did the journey on my own, and then, you know, they would pick me up at the other end. A bit like when you fly with a label on now – unescorted children, but then it was on trains.

My parents did some wonderful pantomimes in those days, there were two big pantomime producers, Francis Laidler and Emile Littler And those pantomimes just don't exist anymore – they were fantastic because the story line was very strong, obviously the cast was very good, and it all kind of made sense. But the only strange thing I suppose

was the fact that they usually had a speciality act in the pantomime. They played parts, like they would play 'The Broker's Men' and then later my mother would play the witch and my father would play the king, and then they would find some reason for them to appear on stilts in the middle of the pantomime. I have seen a lot less suitable acts. In the period 1945 to 68 when, although some people would say Variety wasn't at its height – but my parents – definitely in the fifties – worked every single week, they very rarely had a week when they didn't work, so there was a lot going on. And I mean, even when I started working in 1964, I did my first show, it was in the Bolton Pantomime and I was the fairy, and I was 14.

I do remember at the time my parents were... they had said to the producer... I'd been at the

Actors' Church Union School then I went to a – because The Actors' Church Union School closed down – I went to a school called The Actors' Orphanage. There weren't any actors' orphans, and basically they had these two big houses in Watford on Hempstead Road, beautiful old houses and they needed them to be used, so basically, they said 'well, any actors children...' – however, there weren't many of us, probably, like, six. We went to the normal Primary School down the Road, but they obviously decided it wasn't cost-effective, because they closed – and when they closed I was ten. The Actors Church Union said that they thought there was a school called Elmhurst Ballet School, and they thought it would be suitable for me, and that if I auditioned and got a place they would give me a small grant. As my mother will say nowadays, [the grant] was very small, and it was an expensive school. But basically I auditioned. I had never danced in my life and I went to the audition – I had had ten dancing lessons. That summer season my parents were in Morecombe at the Winter Gardens Theatre with Charlie Chester in a show called Pot Luck, and there was an act called Franklyn and his Doves, which the name speaks for itself – he had a lot of doves. Anyway they sent me to this dancing teacher, she was actually amazing. I do remember I had to call her 'Madame', and I've never had to do that for any dancing teacher before or since! But she was very good and in ten weeks she taught me everything. You know, every step, and what the name of the step was in case they asked me for a step at least I would know what they were called. And I went to the school, and I auditioned and I got in, so I got the little scholarship from The Actors' Church Union. And so, by then I was eleven and at Elmhurst, and that was kind of, the happiest time I remember, because I loved the school. And everybody knew what I was talking about, when I talked about show business, and about things like the tabs which were the curtains and all the show business terms – because those children were training for theatre – they all knew what I was talking about, which beforehand, although I had been with other actors' children – we had gone to ordinary schools and I never did very well at ordinary schools because nobody knew what... I was so different from everybody else, you know. And I did feel different then. However, when I went to Elmhurst I didn't and I got on pretty well there. I started to do really well. Plus the fact that I had been in classes of thirty plus, and suddenly I was in a class of eleven children in our class, so it was very individual with the education classes.

I'm trying to think what else I can tell you; it was quite exciting being a child of Variety, because, as I said, in the holidays I went to wherever my parents were, well they were always in different shows. Particularly as I got older... I mean, I do remember once I did a summer season at Weymouth at the Pavilion Theatre. It was a brand new theatre, it was the first season that it had opened and it wasn't actually finished backstage. And I had an accident, I fell down the stairwell. As I went – I didn't actually go right through because the bars that you hold onto held me – but as I went, one of the stairs, the concrete went into my leg where I have a scar. But in that show there were twenty-odd

children of performers, and that was really unusual, usually there were two or three people who had children, and we would get together. In those days there wasn't health and safety so you could always stand on the side of the stage and watch the shows, and, in fact, that was a fantastic education. Sadly nowadays – I have two grandchildren, and they aren't allowed to stand on the side of the stage – my daughter was allowed to, but her father was stage manager. But it is sad, because that was the learning process for children in show business, and that's why a lot of them went into show business; because from two and three years old they were always in the theatre. I've spoken to friends and people I grew up with and we said, 'We knew how to behave'. Nobody ever told us to be quiet, because we would never dream of making a noise. You know, we knew we were privileged to be able to stand on the side and if we behaved we could stand on the side again. So we watched all sorts of amazing performers.

OR: Is there any one performance that really stands out in your memory as something that made you want to go into the theatre?

SB: I wasn't sure at the time... well, I suppose when I went to Elmhurst I did kind of think 'well I am training for the theatre...' I remember people in Weymouth, that I was just talking about, it was a bit of an odd summer season because the cast stayed the same, the basic cast, but the stars changed. And so it was, for two weeks people like Alfred Marks, and Freddie Mills. Now Alfred Marks was an actor, Freddie Mills had been a boxer, and I still can't really remember what on earth they did, but for some reason they were teamed up together. And then there was Benny Hill for a few weeks, it may have been three or four weeks, but it was definitely Alfred Marks, Freddie Mills, Benny Hill... I'm not sure who else. On that bill there was a Big Band, Cyril Stapleton and his Show Band, so I do remember standing on the side.

Except, during that show we did get banned from the theatre (the children). It was the first time ever, and they said 'I'm sorry there are just too many children, we can't have twenty children stood on the side, the actors will never get on and off the stage. I'm sorry you're just going to have to go outside'. And when you think about it now, the children's ages were from four or five up to sixteen, and they just said to us 'Well you will just have to go out during the show'. So where Weymouth Pavilion was – it's not a pier – but it slightly sticks out and it's where all the ferries go across to Jersey and places. And I do remember the weather was good and we used to just play on the beach. Anyway, we decided to picket [laughs] outside the dressing room windows and we made these placards which said 'You can't keep the children out!' and things like that. And we paraded with these long poles – the dressing room windows were probably eight feet up, so we made these poles so we could walk along the windows and all our parents would see these banners saying 'You can't keep the children out!'. Well, two girls in the show, their father was Peter Vernon and he was also the company manager so he was probably in a bit of an embarrassing state, because, you know, it was the stage management, and everybody that said 'You have to keep the children out', and he was the company manager. But he also had two children, so, it was a bit difficult. Anyway, when I had my accident with my leg I was rushed to hospital, but when I came back they said that I could stand on the side of the stage, and that I could choose one child per show to come with me. I could sit on the side and I could have one child standing with me. So of course, everybody wanted to be my friend. I did do it fairly and I took one different person each show. I remember that Alfred Marks gave me three pocket games, pocket, chess, pocket draughts, and something else – because I had had an accident. So I was a bit spoilt then.

As far as other performers are concerned, when I was about eight during an Easter holidays, my parents were doing a tour with Cliff Richard and the Shadows – who at the time were actually called the Drifters; they had to change their name because the American Drifters came to England, and so they changed to the Shadows. Anyway, Cliff was eighteen, and I thought he was great, I used to stand on the side. He was causing a sensation at the time, and all these girls were screaming, it was the first time I had heard big crowds of girls screaming. Well, their boyfriends got really annoyed, so they went up into the gods and started throwing tomatoes and eggs onto the stage at all the acts. And Cliff pleaded with my parents not to go on, he was really worried about them, and they said 'look' – my dad said, 'We'll go on, and if we think it's dangerous, we'll come off, but don't worry'. Cliff was ready to give up show business! The comedian on the bill was Des O'Connor, and he was billed as a modern style comedian, Tommy Wallace and Beryl were xylophone players, and there were a couple of other acts, I think. Kay and Kimberly were the dancing act. Oh, and Ray Allen who later had a ventriloquist dummy called Lord Charles, but at the time he had a dummy called Steve.

Obviously, there were a lot of problems; they had to keep bringing in the curtains because there were all these squashed tomatoes, eggs were thrown at the stage. And then a terrible thing happened: some of the boys up in the gods had got hold of a fire extinguisher, and dropped it down into the stalls, and it hurt a mother and her daughter. I'm not sure how hurt they were, because, obviously I was a child and no one would say, but I've talked to some of the performers who were there at the time and they said it was really terrible. The other terrible thing that happened was – on the last night of the show we would always pack up the act stuff, and because my parents had a lot of props, properties which were things you worked with, like juggling clubs if you were a juggler and tricks if you were a magician. Well they had stilts and the marionettes, and they decided to leave them in the theatre overnight, under the watchful eye of the night watchmen. And the Shadows left all their gear; the guitars amplifiers, everything, in a pile in one area so that the night watchmen could keep his eye on them. Well, the next morning we came out of the digs and we were driving along the street, and in those days it was a Morris Oxford Traveller and the front seat was a bench sort of seat, and I was in the middle being the child (on the gearbox, practically), and we saw my parent's stage clothes, the stilts all along Chiswick High Road. It was like a nightmare, because it was like, 'Oh, and there's my so-and-so', and we were literally jumping out of the car and grabbing the stilts, the puppets and all that kind of thing. And what had happened was these boys had broken into the theatre, they thought they had grabbed Cliff and The Shadows' gear and they had taken my parents' stilts and puppets and when they discovered that what they had got wasn't guitars and amplifiers, they just discarded them along the High Road. So by some miracle they got all the props back. The stilt suits were very dirty, but the Grades, who were running the show – and that was Chiswick Empire – they had all the costumes cleaned and everything because the next night they were due to work at Finsbury Park Empire, another Moss Empire date.

So, that was a bit of a tale to tell. And then later on when I was thirteen... twelve and thirteen, my parents did two summer seasons with Adam Faith and the Roulettes, and of course it was in the 60's, and I was mad on pop music, and the second year my parents said I could invite three different friends to come for a week each. And of course everyone wanted to come because it was pop groups, and on the Sunday The Beatles did a Sunday concert in Margate and Ted Rogers, who was a comedian who later became famous for doing Three, Two, One the TV show with Dusty Bin, and on the Monday he said to me, 'I've got a present for you', and I said, 'Oh, what's that?', and he said, 'Here, this is Paul McCartney's guitar string' and I've still got it – so there were advantages! [laughs].

OR: Do you remember much about the atmosphere of the theatres you played in?

SB: It was great, I think it was almost... well it was a lot of peoples' home, because like my parents toured, a lot of them didn't have a permanent home. Either because they couldn't afford it, or that they were working so much it was pointless; they never went home. And my parents, they tell me – and when I think about it I can't believe they actually listened to me, and how could I have been so horrible. But I obviously didn't realise what I was saying – I said I was the only child at school without a home [laughs] so they ended up getting the house I still live in, in Northampton, only because it was the centre of England. And because there was a singer called Ruby Murray who was very well

known, she's the only person, I think the record may have been broken, to have had five singles in the top twenty all together, at one time. My parents did a tour with her that lasted a year, with Ted Rogers: Snow White and the Seven Dwarves. And she said, 'Why don't you come and live in Northampton, there's nobody in show business who lives there', so she basically found this house for my parents.

But until then the theatre was our home. And my mum would always make the dressing room... she had nice, sort of, clothes to pin. They used to have these kind of – it's hard to describe them – but basically it was a piece of material almost like a table cloth folded, you would use drawing pins to pin

it to the dressing room table hanging downwards, and then fold it up again. They had sewn or machined pockets to put in their underwear and stilt socks and things like that. And then on top, they would have these mats, and I always remember that in between shows we would always have a meal – I loved shrimps so my mum would get shrimps, so I could have a shrimp sandwich or something.

Apart from that they would stay in digs, theatrical digs, and there were a few very strange digs, and when you're looking for accommodation – just like if you are going to University – you don't really know what you're going for, you hear rumours; 'oh, this is a good place, that's a good place'. And there were some digs that you had to apply... you wouldn't book that far in advance because when you got to the theatre there would be a digs list. It would be on the board by the stage doorman, and you would look down the list, and look around until you found somewhere. Obviously the earlier you got there the better the choice you had. But if there was somewhere you knew you were going to a specific place... when I was working in the late sixties, and going out of the Theatre Archive Project era, a bit later on, in Leeds there was Basil's, and I do remember everybody wanted to stay at Basil's, and because a friend of ours was staying there, he sort of talked them into taking us, because they only took usually four people, and they took six, or something like that. But in the summer and at pantos – actually, at pantos they did often have digs – but in the summer season we used to try and get a flat, so that, when I said the atmosphere of the theatre where it was a home, when you had a long season then the dressing room became more of a dressing room because you would have a flat.

But the other thing as far as atmosphere is concerned is that it was a bit like a family, although you weren't with the same people, obviously during a season you worked with the same people, but if you were doing weekly Variety, you weren't always with the same group of people. But, in the days of travelling by train I can remember when I was

pretty tiny my parents did a tour with Roy Castle and it was his first week in show business, he was very young. He ended up doing that series Record Breakers and being in Singing in the Rain at the London Palladium in the eighties. But, it was his first week and my mum kind of took him under her wing a bit, I think. But we used to travel by train, and everybody talks about stopping at Crewe, and I actually know that we used to stop in Crewe to change trains, because that's where all trains seemed to stop. But I remember once, Roy and... It was something like his manager, but it was man with a limp... but anyway they decided at a station – I don't remember if it was Crewe or not – but they decided to get some hot drinks for us all. And I was like, 'Oh, how long have we go, how long have we got?'. I think I was panicking a bit, being a young child and because I adored Roy Castle and the next thing is the whistle blew, and the train started to go out of the station, and I can remember looking up at the window, and my parents saying, 'Don't worry it will be alright' – and I was crying – 'He'll be on the train'. I thought we'd left him behind, but they had just managed to get on in the last compartment [as the train left] the station, but it took them about 15 minutes or so to get to where we were sitting, and I thought I would never see him again. But they arrived with the hot drinks, and the station master had realised that they needed to get on the train so they had waited for them. So it was like a big family and although you might not see people for six months, you would always see the same acts again because their agent was the same. So if you were with Lew and Lesley Grade, you would probably, more often than not work with acts that were with the same agent.

OR: You have already said how you got to travel a lot with Variety theatre, were there any differences in specific theatres that really stand out in your memory?

SB: Well obviously Chiswick Empire for the reason I said, because our stuff got stolen. The Winter Gardens at Morecombe, because it had a fairground at the back – it was just before I went to Elmhurst, so I was ten – and I spent the entire summer in the fairground, and I ended up going to my first term at Elmhurst with nits in my hair, and that didn't go down very well, which I must have caught from somewhere there! Some of those theatres were, and still are – the ones that are still going – were in really good condition at the time, but the Empire theatres and the Hippodrome Bristol... there were certain what you call 'dates' that were more prestigious. If you got a pantomime, I think earlier on at Leeds Grand or the Empire Sheffield – any of those. There used to be Hanley near Stoke-on-Trent, I do remember that because I remember the Dame was Ken Platt and his assistant was called Brian and he spent a lot of time looking after me because everyone else was rushing around on stage all the time.

Also, the piers in the summer, the seaside resorts with piers. My Grandfather ran shows in Blackpool for seventeen years on the North Pier and the Central Pier, so obviously I remember those. Also my Grandfather bought a theatre in Lowestoft called The Arcadia Theatre, and he actually ran a repertory theatre there, and Michael Cain was one of the young actors. I remember seeing my grandfather in plays there, and although, obviously, he was a comedian he was a good actor too. So I remember that theatre too, because it was the family theatre. But, the problem was – I've forgotten the exact dates – but there were floods, bad floods in East Anglia, and the theatre got flooded, and it came right over the seats and everything, and it cost a lot to have it refurbished and it got flooded again. So my grandfather, in the end, just gave up with that theatre because it was a liability. And of course that coast does get bad weather, and I think that the theatre was... I don't know how much above sea level, but not a lot. I don't think he thought

when he bought the theatre that that was going to happen. But great Yarmouth had the Britannia Pier, and other piers there.

OR: Did your parents talk much about a change in Theatre Post-war?

SB: Well yes... well I'll tell you the main time, it was the late sixties. I think it started in the late fifties when the theatres began to close. Whereas through the fifties, to the end of the fifties they were in work every night in theatres, in the sixties the theatres were closing down, becoming bingo halls, it was really sad – or warehouses, or supermarkets or things like that. They had difficulty because it was a very spectacular act, it was very good in a big theatre. But when it became clubs... or I suppose some of the acts that were more circus-type acts, maybe animal acts or probably the trick cyclist-type acts went to circus; started working more circuses. Or in Europe – everybody used to say 'on the continent' – my aunt and uncle (when my uncle split up from my parents, act-wise, he went and worked with his wife) went and lived in Paris and worked and there was loads of work over there, but because I was in boarding school in England, my parents did go over to Germany, France, Italy quite a lot, and Spain, but they wanted to try and work in England, so they had to adapt their act to fit in with the Theatre Clubs, Cabaret Clubs. In a way they were trying to keep entertainment going, these clubs, but when it got to the Working Men's Clubs, all the kind of glamour was lost, and it was almost going back to Music Hall, because Music Hall was different from Variety in that with Music Hall it was kind of bawdy, there was eating and drinking, and rowdy, it wasn't family entertainment, it was adult entertainment. The theatres came in and Oswald Stoll, who became Sir Oswald Stoll and was a Tea-totaller, began to build those Empires... Frank Matcham was the designer. He started to design these theatres with family entertainment in mind, and what happened was it became Clubland, and it wasn't suitable for children anymore. The comedians started to be blue, tell not such clean gags. You wouldn't take a child – though, having said that, some people did take their children to Working Men's Clubs! But it was different. Then, even later, the Civic Theatres started to be built and there's much more family entertainment now, going back to Variety... so it kind of keeps going round in a circle I think.

OR: Especially with panto, I've seen some brilliant pantos.

SB: Yes, yes.

OR: I read about the time pressure in Variety theatre, between the acts and things, do you remember much about that?

SB: Well, yes, I do, I remember that every act was given so many minutes to perform. A speciality act used to do –early on, sort of post-second world war into the sixties I think – it used to be... your act would be eight or ten minutes. I do remember my parents doing twelve minutes. A dancing act would have six minutes, and then a comedian would do however many minutes – ten or twelve minutes, and then another speciality act would go on, and the top of the bill probably never did more than twenty minutes. So it was a very tight show, there were a lot of acts, and it was still the same length as a musical nowadays, but they fitted in a lot. It was a bit like now you have those shows, Britain's

Got Talent, that kind of thing, it was that fast. In a way it was good because it kept everybody interested, and if you didn't like that act, three minutes later you were going to see something else, so from that point of view... but then what happened is, because stars started demanding more money, and they would get American stars coming over, of course it was difficult because they had to find some cost-cutting way to pay the big stars. So what they did is had less acts, and said, 'Oh, and as an act, could you do two spots, instead of just your one, can you do something else as well'. And my parents did a second act... there had been a Music Hall entertainer, Little Tich who worked with long shoes, big boots, and he used to do leaning over on these long –because he was very short – leaning over on these long shoes.

OR: Ah yes, I think I've seen something like that before.

SB: Yes that's right, well he was a very famous Music Hall performer. My parents learnt the big boots, my father had always done it, since he was fourteen, and he could do an impression of Little Tich. But anyway, they did the big boots as their second spot. The only thing was, doing the Big Boots was exhausting, and I know because I took over the act from my mother, so I did the stilts and the big boots, and you can't breathe after the big boots. So they had two really contrasting things: they had the stilts with marionettes, and the Big Boots. Which obviously the management loved because a lot of people... say if you were a juggler and only juggled – you would have to do two spots juggling, maybe with two tricks – but it wasn't that contrasting. But basically, that's why my parents kept getting work, because they catered for what people were looking for, which was for two contrasting acts. But then of course you were doing longer, you weren't just doing one twelve minute slot, you were suddenly doing another twelve minutes, or six minutes or eight minutes. And then of course, when the theatre clubs came in, in the sort of, mid-sixties, it was then, like, 'Could you do two half hour spots?'. Well, of course, you can't in that period of time, have the same impact, you have to build an act to a crescendo of some sort, so that people are interested. You can't do your best trick first or whatever, so you had to build the act. and the longer the act, there are obviously bits in the middle that aren't as interesting, you have to have a strong beginning and a very strong finish so you... I saw a lot of acts where I thought 'well you could cut that out, and it would be much tighter, much better'. It became that you weren't paid for what your act was, but how long you did, and in the end the star performers had to do two hours. And really nobody can be that good for two hours, even Frank Sinatra and people like that. Forty-five minutes is a really good amount for a singer, for that kind of act. So those Variety days it was good, slick!

OR: I read about the Variety theatre, and I was wondering if it was really in competition with other types of theatre that were expanding at the time?

SB: Well I think at the time most towns had two theatres or more, Sheffield, at one time had a lot of theatres, but they always had a repertory theatre, or a theatre that did plays, and a Variety theatre. And in actual fact, there was room for both, there definitely was. Variety was the sort of, people's theatre. The general public... like now everybody goes to musicals, in those days everyone went to Variety, because it's easy, it's light hearted, you don't have to think a lot. People went to plays, and particularly with repertory theatre, it was wonderful... because repertory theatre had the same cast for a season, and that might be a year, or it might be shorter, but those actors – if you went every

week – you would see them in a different role, and obviously you would have your favourite actors and actresses. and so when television came in, some of those better actors and actresses did plays on television, and of course it was live television and the people who had supported them in Rep watched them on the telly, so that was really good for the actors, and for the people who had followed their career. There wasn't really any big rivalry, because they were really catering for a different audience. There were people that went to both say, a play goer might go to a single Variety Show in the year, and people who went to Variety every week might go to the odd play if they fancied the title of the play or who was on. And it was fun in the digs, because I can remember as a child being in Nottingham in some digs, and my parents I think were working at the Empire, and there was the Nottingham Playhouse, and the actors were rehearsing, they weren't performing that week, and my parents asked the landlady if I could stay in the digs and watch television while they went to the theatre. And she said, 'Oh, yes, that's fine'. And I loved it because I had decided I wanted to be an actress, not in Variety at all, and I decided that was what I wanted to do, drama. I thought it was the best thing ever, all these actors were in the digs talking about straight theatre, and I actually trained to go into straight theatre, and then got diverted into Variety. But yes, there wasn't any big rivalry. In fact, I think they all admired each other, because the actors used to think, 'Oh, god, I couldn't...' particularly, like comedians not know whether you would get a laugh or not. And a lot of actors are insecure and hide behind the part. And I do know, from my own experience... it's almost like students, or not only students but people who would get up and do karaoke. Very few professional performers like doing karaoke, because they haven't rehearsed. Actors always had rehearsals, and then they went and did a part, but with a lot of Variety – particularly with the clubs – it became very ad-libby, it's a different kind of thing, but they all admired one another.

OR: And I guess the audience reaction was much more immediate as well with Variety, they were much more responsive.

SB: Yes, both positive and negative! Because if they didn't like an act... There's the famous Glasgow Pavilion Theatre which was known as the, kind of, graveyard of performers, and I actually ended up working there later than 1968... actually it wasn't that much later than 1968. But we did end up in Glasgow Pavilion, and we were with an act called 'The Grumbleweeds', and my dad and I were doing the act, and they spent the whole time apologising because there was hardly anyone in the audience and they were going 'it's our fault', and I said 'it's nothing to do with you, there's nothing wrong with your act' the public just hadn't come. And the public that was there were a really difficult audience, they just didn't applaud. I suppose my dad and I did okay, but it was almost like thinking, 'I'm going out to perform and entertain people who don't really want to be entertained'. But Glasgow Pavilion Theatre goes almost prided themselves in, you know, 'Try and entertain us, we're known as being the hardest audience'. But if they did like you, it was amazing.

OR: Do you remember any particular characters from your Variety theatre days?

SB: The people? Yes I do, I'm trying to think who. There was a fabulous guy, Billy Burden, who... I think there's a comedian now called Jethro, who does, practically Billy Burden's act. His material may be original, but Billy Burden was the original country yokel

comedian, and he was like it off stage as well. He came from Dorset, he had a very strong Dorset accent, and he used to come out with a hat with a piece of straw sticking out, and his dungarees and chequered shirt, very funny comedian, but a lovely man, but very like his act on stage. And then there was, obviously Tommy Cooper, people like Tommy Cooper and Frankie Howerd were very sort of, individual, a bit different. Frankie Howerd

always used to hold fort after the show, and sort of, get everybody together and chat, and was very entertaining and interesting. My parents worked with Tony Hancock, who my mum said was very quiet and didn't talk a lot, didn't mix a lot with people. And then there were people who were extra friendly. And because we toured for such a long time with people like Ted Rogers, I kind of, grew up with him. He'd been to America, and seen how the comedians were very slick very smartly dressed – looked at being a comedian as a business. Also he was very topical, all his gags were literally that morning written and eventually he had script writers to help, but I know, originally, he was reading the papers first thing in the morning, writing stuff, and going on that night and doing it. He had that great ability of remembering that day's news, and he was very clever. And the other thing was he so immaculate that he never... when I was performing and my grandmother ended up doing wardrobe for our shows, you never sat in your costume, you never sat in your stage costumes, because it would get crumpled. Nowadays people slouch all over the place in them, but in those days nobody ever did. Ted Rogers... he would get someone to hold his trousers – it was really clever what he did – he'd slip into them, he never had a crease in his clothes, he was always immaculately dressed. And that kind of stuck in my mind, because I was like, 'Oh my god, what a strange way to put your trousers on'.

And a lot of acts would not put their clothes on – suits particularly – until the last minute because they needed to look extremely smart. And obviously it wasn't as casual nowadays. And I also think the reason now is nothing to do with the people, the performers, it's because nobody is taught. It's like, you don't get the same training, because you used to learn by performing in show to show and the older people would say to the younger people... I've been told off for sitting in a costume – actually, I wasn't sitting I was leaning on the back of a chair in the audience watching a bit of a rehearsal. I said 'I'm not sitting down' and they said, 'No, you don't do that either'. But nobody tells anybody nowadays, it's just that they don't know and they don't learn from the older people in the cast. Because if an older person turned around to a young one and said 'don't sit down in your costume', they would probably be totally ignored – I haven't tried that.

OR: So generation passes thing on to generation.

SB: It is, and it's not... I mean there are some easily as good performers nowadays, but they just don't have that training. There are lots of theatre schools and performing arts schools, like the school I went to. But it's not like being in the theatre, it's not the same. If you are in the theatre and

shows going on, you see a whole different side to it.

OR: I suppose you get to see the technical side of it as well.

SB: Well, you do. and although you do in, say, a university theatre – you do, but because its normally students and one or two tutors, it's not quite the same as having all generations in that theatre, and the older ones saying... if they thought the younger ones were good, they would almost take them under their wing, and say, 'Do this', and 'try that'. That doesn't happen nowadays, because you have people going out singly in the clubs. And by the time they have got to television, it's almost too late.

OR: Okay I think that's it, thank you that was absolutely fascinating.