

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

<http://sounds.bl.uk>

Albert Mack – interview transcript

Interviewer: Sue Barbour

24 October 2008

Theatre-goer and amateur actor. Billie Bennett; Bernard Bresslaw; Roy Castle; Harry Champion; Charles Dennis; The Empire, Nottingham; Will Fyffe; Horace Golding; Arthur Hindley; Jimmy James; Lupino Lane; Me and My Girl; monologues; Nottingham theatres; pantomimes; Scott Sanders; Wilson, Kepple and Betty; Brendan Woods.

SB: This is Sue Barbour, I'm doing a PhD with the University of Sheffield and The British Library Theatre Project and I'm interviewing Albert Mack. First of all Albert could you just confirm that... you're in agreement for us to use this recording for the British Library Theatre Project and for future generations to understand this period of theatre, variety and light entertainment.

AM: Full agreement, yes.

SB: Great. Well, first of all, could you just tell me a little bit about where you were born and brought up?

AM: I was born in London in the New Cross Road which is in Deptford and the borough of Greenwich, SE14.

SB: And when did you first become aware of entertainment?

AM: Well, I was just thinking that the first time was when my father used to perform in the kitchen, little bits of Harry Champion. Harry Champion was before my time but he used to do Harry Champion's signature tune, I think it was of 'Any Old Iron', but he never knew all the words so all we got was the beginning and the dance at the end and I decided to learn it with the verse and the chorus. Which was good to bring into a little show that I did... Do you want the words?

SB: Yes, if you can remember them.

AM: [Sings] Just a week or two ago my poor old Uncle Bill / Went and kicked the bucket and left me in his will / The other day I popped around to see poor Aunty Jane / She

said your Uncle Bill has left to you a watch and chain / I put it on, right across me vest / Thought I looked a dandy with it dangling from my chest / Just to show it off, I started strollin' round about / A crowd of kiddies followed me and all began to shout / Any old iron, any old iron, any, any, any old iron / Oh, you'll look neat, talk about a treat / Dressed from the napper to the bottom of your feet / Dressed in style with a brand new tile / And your father's old green tie on / Oh, I wouldn't give you tuppence for your old watch chain / Old iron, old iron...da da, da da, da da. da da, da da. da da

Dan da da da da, dum dum!

Now you can bring [the audience] in as many times as you want and they all like to hear Any Old Iron and try and join in with you, you see.

SB: Yes... and how old were you when you decided to learn it?

AM: Oh I'd be past forty-six, fifty perhaps and of course, my wife accompanies me. Even [she] knows it now, I think.

SB: Great. And how old were you when you first went to the theatre. Can you remember?

AM: Well, it's as I said, I think Horace Golding, 'Sixty Tricks in Sixty Minutes'. My father said, 'Go and see him' you see, so I decided to. Well, I went with my brother because I was only about 11 years old [or] 12 years old.

SB: And what were his Sixty Tricks? Were they all magic tricks or...?

AM: Oh, I can't remember them now because we're going back to about 1935 or 34 but it was an interesting programme and it was sixty tricks in sixty minutes and [he] was on the go all the time which is the thing with a show, you have to keep it going otherwise you lose the interest of the audience, you see.

SB: Mmm. So you moved from Deptford up to Nottingham?

AM: Nottingham – Ruddington, yes and of course, Ruddington in those days was miles out of Nottingham. You never used to get to Nottingham much, only once a week perhaps, if that but when I came into Nottingham I'd spend the morning perhaps helping or working for the local greengrocer and from eight o'clock to one o'clock I used to get two shillings pay so that took me to Nottingham and 6d up in the gods at the Empire, was marvellous.

SB: And what did you used to see there? What kind of entertainment?

AM: Oh, well it was called Variety in those days. Now, these people went on the radio, and you never saw them, until they got to the Empire and of course there was a huge amount of interest in seeing them. People like Hutch and all the other people, Rob Wilton and Stainless Steven and... who else now, Billie Bennett. Now Billie Bennett, I didn't see much of him but he came on the stage and he used to belt his monologues out. One of those was:

It was a dirty night, it was a dirty trick, when our ship turned upside down in the Atlantic. / It was the schooner The Esporas, we all lay asleep in our bunks, we were bound for a cruise where they have no revues and a cargo of Elephant trunks. / The sea was as smooth as a baby's top lip, not even a Policeman in sight. The little Sardines climbed back in their tins and pulled down the lids for the night. / The Captain said, 'The ship's going down, I doubt whether we shall reach Blighty', / The Bosun said, 'It's women and children first!' so I pulled on the old woman's nightie. / I said to a girl, 'You must swim for your life, cling on to a buoy if you can' / She looked at me coy, she said, 'You're not a boy, get off you're a dirty old man!'.

SB: [laughs]

AM: That was Billie Bennett. And there was so many... another man, I can't remember his name but he was all for the working class. And then there was Norman Evans 'Over the Garden Wall'. These people were all Top of the Bill.

SB: Mmm.

AM: And you got Will Fyffe, speaking about 'The Scottish Engineer' It was marvellous! But, as I say they had to have a Top of the Bill every week and a cast... Of course, you got some wonderful acts. Wilson, Betty and Kepple (Wilson, Kepple and Betty). They were not Top of the Bill but for a long time they were down at the lower parts of the bill. Wonderful.

SB: And what's the sort of running order of the show? It was definitely all Variety type?

AM: Sometimes they started off.- well, they always started off with the first act. It might be girls dancing or men, three men dancing or something like that and then they'd go up to the break and they might bring on the Star at the break, but sometimes they didn't but when the second half started, they'd start off with a lower order member of the cast and then work up to the Star and give the Star about quarter of an hour and I've seen Dance Bands and all that... Marvellous. Jack Payne, Henry Hall, Oscar Rabin, Mantovani and all those sort of people.

SB: And what were the theatres like? Sort of... atmosphere?

AM: The atmosphere was very classy sort of thing you know. It was a night out.

SB: Mmm.

AM: Now across the road from us now, lives one of the daughters of the man who used to conduct the orchestra at the Empire.

SB: Oh really?

AM: Yes, and she must have a few memories. Whether she does or not I don't know. I haven't spoken a lot to her. [The father] was Charlie Dennis. Do you remember Charlie Dennis?

SB: I've heard the name.

AM: He was the orchestra leader.

SB: Yes.

AM: When Charlie came up it was 'tap tap' strike up the orchestra and we were away, you see. And then there washe was one who used the orchestra leader a lot was Jimmy James. Marvellous, you know.

SB: Yes.

AM: And he had Roy Castle as a stooge - the man that used to come on and say 'Hey, you putting it around I'm barmy?' and of course, he'd look and say 'Why do you want it putting round?' and then he'd stand there and they'd exchange chatter with this other fella he had. Tall, lanky chap. But, he'd say to Roy Castle 'I always remember this joke'. He'd say 'What have you got in that bag? Fish?' - He'd say 'No' - 'Oh, it must be you then!'. [both laugh]

AM: Marvellous.

SB: Was Eli Woods the other...?

AM: Eli Woods. Yes. Brendan Woods, wasn't it?

SB: Yes.

AM: Brendan Woods. He called him Eli

SB: Mmm.

AM: He's the one who used to say 'I've been to Africa and I've got a tiger in this box' you know. [laughs]

SB: So was the Empire the main Variety theatre in Nottingham?

AM: Apart from when they had the Theatre Royal. The Theatre Royal used to put on stage plays mainly and I saw Gordon Harker in there in Saloon Bar and Leslie... somebody, I forget, Banks or something, Leslie Banks in another one but the main one I saw was Lupino Lane, with a lot of his family, in Me and My Girl and of course, the main song there was [sings]:

'Lambeth you ain't never seen, the sky ain't blue and the grass ain't green, it ain't got that Mayfair touch, but that don't matter very much. / We dance the Lambeth way, someone like you but a bit more gay / And when we have a bit of fun, oh boy, oh boy / (Chorus) Any time you're Lambeth way, any evening, any day / You'll find us all, doing the Lambeth Walk. / Every little Lambeth gal, with her little Lambeth pal, / You'll find them all, doin' the Lambeth Walk. / Everything's free and easy, do as you darn well please-y / Why don't you make your way there, go there, stay there / Once you get down Lambeth way, any evening, any day, / You'll find them all, doing the Lambeth, doing the Lambeth, doing the Lambeth Walk / Oy!'

SB: And that was a big hit, wasn't it?

AM: Yes, it's one of the songs that they sent to America. One of the first songs. Big hits they sent.

SB: And did you see any pantomimes?

AM: Pantomime. Now, I began to get a bit fed up with pantomimes. I took part in one but I wasn't very keen on them unless [there] was a big star. Otherwise, you got...you didn't get the big stars; you got these people like Barbara Windsor. They weren't big stars in my mind.

SB: No?

AM: But, they were all right. But the last one I saw, that fellow from the Army Game or something. He used to come on and say 'Well, I only asked'.

SB: Oh yes.

AM: Remember him? Bresslaw.

SB: Yes. Bernard Bresslaw.

AM: Yes. It wasn't very good. The only one who kept the show together was the chap with the little canary. I forget his name. He used to be a ventriloquist.

SB: I'm trying to think who that was.

AM: But he was quite good.

SB: So, if...did you ever think of performing yourself.

AM: Not in those days. No. No.

SB: How did you first come to do the amateur...?

AM: Well, as I say, going into that pantomime in Edwalton, and doing it before the villagers, sort of thing, perhaps I got my confidence and they enjoyed it and I sang a song in the pantomime. And then I thought afterwards, 'I like that' but they only did the pantomime, they didn't do anything else so I decided to join West Bridgeford Drama Group, which I was in for about 30 years.

SB: Gosh! And early on, when you sort of went to the theatre, in the Gods and everything did you particularly look out for... I mean... from the Top of the Bill.

AM: What did I look out for?

SB: I mean, you said about entrances and exits?

AM: Oh, yes! That was marvellous. I used to like to see Scott Sanders go off. He did it so... it seemed to be so smooth, I mean, he wasn't a big star or anything but he did it smooth and...

SB: What was his act?

AM: The Costermonger and these pots and pans hanging on and a song, a couple of jokes, the rest of the song and off. He must have been on about £10 per week and that was a big wage perhaps. He might have got more, I don't know, but he was travelling

round the country you see. From Torquay, perhaps, up to Glasgow, which they all dreaded going to, I think. [both laugh].

SB: And did you feel that that was an exciting life?

AM: I did. Yes, I did think that was exciting. Living in a different place every night, every week, sort of thing. They tell me they all used to meet at Crewe and then they'd swap their stories and then go on their way to the next place, because they always had a rehearsal at Monday morning, you see.

SB: Yes, the band call, on Monday. And was Crewe because of the trains? They travelled by train?

AM: Yes, it was pretty easy access from Crewe I think. South or north.

SB: So, did you continue, over the years, going to the theatre. I mean, was there a point more than others that you went.

AM: Well, in 1940 I joined the Navy.

SB: Oh right.

AM: I feel that if I'd got these words off then, I could have performed on ship but I didn't you see so it more or less lapsed there but now I like to learn a monologue and if I do a song, being the age I am, it's nice to get your breath back with a monologue you see, so you come up with:

'There's a famous seaside place called Blackpool, that's noted for fresh air and fun...'

Or 'You've heard of poor old Albert Ramsbottom, in zoo up at Blackpool one year with a stick with a horse's head handle gave a lion a poke in the ear'.

Or 'I've been very poorly but now I feel fine, I've bin out today for the very first time. I felt quite a lad as I walked down the road and then I met old Jones. He said 'Well, I'm blowed, my word you do look queer' and of course that gets your breath back or Cyril Fletcher, who used to be Top of the Bill at the Nottingham Empire and he had these odd odes... coming up:

'The Tale of Sonia Snell to whom an accident befell, an accident which may well seem embarrassing in the extreme. It happened, as it does to many, that Sonia had to spend a penny and entering in with modest grace provided at the railway station'... and so on, you see.

SB: Very good. Yes, Cyril Fletcher...was that in the forties and fifties? Was it?

AM: Yes, yes. Top of the Bill he was, you see.

SB: Mmm, mm.

AM: But, I've just got a book of his actually. Some of them are a bit duff you know. With the times, they're like... One I'm learning is 'The Tale of Marjorie Spicer, who leaned against a bacon slicer and as she stepped back murmured 'cor, I think I've lost the slice or two' Well, that comes up with the wartime and she goes back to the grocer's and he said with passion you can only have... you can't have more than your ration. Well, people today, you'd have to explain that before you started...

SB: That's right. Yes.

AM: Mmm.

SB: So you were in the Navy for how long?

AM: Well, I signed up on seven years, five on the reserve and then when I'd finished my seven years, I had eight months off my reserve time or six months off my reserve time because I'd started before I was eighteen, you see and I got six months to do... and they called me back for another eighteen months. So, that was a very depressing time of my life.

SB: Was it?

AM: Mmmm.

SB: And when you did leave, you came back and what did you do when you got back?

AM: Well, I went back to the place where I left. A place called Montague Burton's.

SB: Oh yes!

AM: You know?

SB: Yes!

AM: And the advert was 'Let Montague Burton, the tailor of taste, dress you!' Marvellous shops, marvellous and marvellous organisation, where a man could go in a shop, before the war, get measured for a three piece suit and if it was sale time it would

cost him 37/6. Normally it was 45 shillings or 55 shillings or 65 shillings and so on, up to £7.15s 0d. But every sale time, which was twice a year, they knocked 7/6 off everything, so you could buy a Cravenette raincoat for 17/6 because it normally was 25 bob - 25 shillings.

SB: Gosh. And did you work there for the whole of your...?

AM: I started when I was about 16... 15, 15 I started and I got 10/- a week, less money for a stiff collar 6d a week, less tea money 6d a week and there was a bit of insurance, I think... about 4d or 5d, you see. You see, for your National Health or whatever they called it then. Then my bus fare from Ruddington was 2/6 for the week so what was left was spending money but the main thing was we never got a lot of money but we were very, very happy, VERY.

SB:... and a night out at the theatre culminated...

AM: Well I had that out before I started work. I never started [full – time] work before I was fourteen. But I started work if you'd like to know on a place on Clumber Street, called Arthur Hindley. And he used to sell gramophone records and radiograms. Did you ever know that...?

SB: Erm...

AM: It was opposite I think Clinton Street.

SB: Oh right, so in the middle of town.

AM: In the middle, yes. That was Arthur Hindley.

SB: And where was the Empire.?

AM: The Empire was situated against where they've extended the Theatre Royal.

SB: Oh, so they were all within that area? I mean, the Theatre Royal was there.

AM: The Theatre Royal was there and the Empire ran along side it.

SB: Oh, I see.

AM: You see, when they pulled the Empire down, they extended the theatre a little bit.

SB: And was there an outcry when they pulled the theatre down or did nobody bother much about it?

AM: Well, I suppose the people who used to go to the Empire kicked up a fuss but there wasn't much... they didn't think much about pulling places down, did they. Like the Tudor in West Bridgeford, I mean, that was a marvellous venue where they could have had stage plays there. They had a stage you see and cinema.

SB: ... and they pulled that down too?

AM: They pulled it down

SB: Ah.

AM: And it was a wonderful building.

SB: Mmm. Anyway, it has been really interesting talking to you.

AM: We could go on all night really, couldn't we?

SB: Yes and I've really enjoyed the monologues, so thank you very much.

AM: Thank you.

SB: Thank you. It was a pleasure.

[After the recording Albert told me that he would often see the Variety performers come out of the stage door of the Empire. One day he saw Julie Andrews, a young girl at the time, shyly come out of the stage door and cross the road and head towards the market square.]