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Audrey Worsley – interview transcript

Interviewer: Sue Barbour

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Actress. Roy Barbour; George Black; Wilf Crew; ENSA; Get a Load of This; Charles Henry; Hoopla; Ali Khan and Rita Heyworth; pantomime; Variety; Arthur Worsley; Lawrence Wright's On With The Show, Anne Ziegler and Webster Booth.

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SB: This is Sue Barbour. I am speaking to Audrey Worsley, earlier known as Audrey Hewitt and first of all, Audrey, can I ask you if you are in agreement for us to use this recording for the British Library Theatre Project and for future generations to learn about Variety Theatre?

AW: Of course, yes.

SB: OK. First of all I wanted to ask you when were you....where you were born and was anybody in your family in Show Business? Or how did you come.....

AW: Well, I was born in Blackpool in 1922, which... I hate to say that [Both laugh]. Well, I sort of didn't start to take an interest in Show Business at all, although... you may not know this but my father was with the Halle Orchestra.

SB: I didn't know. No.

AW: Yes, he was...when I was tiny. He also was a very good pianist and a drummer as well, but he was so.... what was I saying?

SB: In the Halle?

AW: Yes, and he was always saying, 'Wouldn't you like to learn music? Wouldn't you like to learn singing?' 'No. No.' I used to say 'No' and my mother used to say, 'Well, wouldn't you like to go to dancing lessons?' because she always had a thing about wanting to but she was born at a time when it was rather wicked to go into Show

Business and put make-up on! [Laugh]. So anyway, I decided that I didn't want to know at all until I saw a film called 42nd Street an old Hollywood film and I looked at it and I went home and I said to my Mum... 'I want to go to dancing lessons! I want to go' And I said, 'Yes and I'll go for singing lessons too!'. So I did.

SB: Oh right...and how old were you then, when you started?

AW: I was about twelve. I was a late starter because with dancing, as you know, you've got to start young but I didn't think about it....but I was about twelve when I first started dancing lessons – which was late really – so I had to work very hard and then a year later for singing. It doesn't matter about starting too soon. It's wrong to, you know, so I was about 14 [years] when... singing lessons. So that's how it started. I went to the dancing school and singing lessons separately, until I was about 17 [years]. I used to take part in the Blackpool Children's Pantomime, which was rather a lovely thing. They used to get an Ameri...a London producer down to produce it. It was very nice and everything.

SB: Whereabouts was it put on?

AW: It was at the Grand Theatre, Blackpool

SB: Oh.

AW: Er..The Opera House.

SB: Oh. Very good.

AW: Yes. So that's how it started really. Then of course at the dancing school I had exams....Ballet and Musical Comedy, they used to call it in those days. Now they call it Modern Dance, don't they? But then it was Musical Comedy and Tap which I did mostly, although I studied Ballet but I did mostly those. I think I did quite well really so.....and then the next thing is...my dancing teacher – I was a full-time student by then, from nine o'clock in the morning until about six every night and suddenly she said, 'Girls' – there weren't many of us students so it was rather specialist training in a way – she said, 'Your all going to the North Pier show in Blackpool in the Lawrence Wright – It was a very big show in those days – Lawrence Wright On With The Show.... So we went into that and the Stars of the show were Webster Booth and Anne Ziegler.

SB: Oh were they?

AW: Yes. And I did a bit of singing and Lawrence Wright had heard me sing at the Castle Club where we used to go and do Cabarets....with the School, I was quite alright [laugh]... and so he said, 'If you're a good girl, I'll let you sing on Sunday night with the

Stars. In those days, Sue, you couldn't dance on Sunday nights. On Sundays. It was the law of the land.

SB: Oh. Really?

AW: You could sing and you could play an instrument but you mustn't dance! Now why, I don't know but that was the law of England. Britain.

SB: Gosh!

AW: Yes! So, the stars of the show of the North Pier, Webster, Anne Ziegler and Dave Morris and some other...quite a lot of good people. They used to work on Sunday nights so Lawrence Wright said, 'If you're a good girl you can sing on Sunday nights with the stars'. So I did.

SB: Oh gosh!

AW: So with that, Webster Booth and Anne Ziegler took an interest in me and sort of watched over me in a little way, for the rest of the summer season until about September and came the last night of the show and..... She came on the Sunday Nights when I sang. There were no girls dancing in that, just the stars singing, just singing and music, the musicians and things. So she said, 'Audrey, when this show is finished', she said, 'Do be very careful. It's a hard business, Show Business, you know. It really is hard and you've got to be very sure of yourself, of what you want to do, so if you're ever at a loss and don't know what to do, get a bit of experience first'. And I was very lucky because I went with Roy Barbour's show, which was a lovely show, for a full year..... two years, I think it was and then break off to go into pantomime.

SB: Oh yes. And was that touring, that show?

AW: Yes, yes. It was all touring then, well this was, yes. It was very nice 'though'. So she said, 'If you're ever at a loss', Ann Ziegler said to me. It was good that they took an interest in me, with me singing, with being a dancer but I was singing on Sunday night - sort of all soprano and all that business. 'The person to get in touch with, if you feel you need to. Is to go to London and get in touch with Charles Henry'. Have you heard of Charles Henry?

SB: Yes.

AW: He was the big booker for George Black shows. And she said – anyway I had two good years experience with Roy Barbour show, the most marvellous experience where he let me do anything...dancing, singing, everything. Then I went to the pantomime with Francis Laidler, which was a wonderful show at Leeds and then after that I had

nothing. I... 'What shall I do? - because I'd left Roy by then - Roy Barbour and been with Francis Laidler and I thought 'What do I do, where...and I remembered Anne Ziegler, so I wrote to London to Charles Henry and I said, 'Miss Anne Ziegler told me to get in touch with you if ever I would like you to give me an audition, to see me work'. So there was no reply! [Both laugh]. So I went to London on my own. I was still only...very naïve and no reply.... So I thought, 'I'll give myself two weeks to stay and see - in London, you see - and see what happens. So, in those days, you have a lot of nerve so I wrote a very sort of short [abrupt] letter. 'Dear Mr. Henry, As you are aware I wrote to you requesting an audition. For Webster Booth and Anne Ziegler told me to get in touch with you. That did it...I had a letter! I'd just written an ordinary letter asking...could I have an audition. "Would I available...Friday morning at the London Hippodrome. Bring music and shoes. [Both laugh]. So there it.... and there I stood on the stage of the London Hippodrome, in the morning, all dark and one big light up above my head, up there [points up] and Vi, who I came to know very well, the pianist. Then at the back of the stalls I saw the door opening from where the offices were for Moss Empires, and in came Charles Henry, followed by somebody else and I thought 'Who's that? Oh'... only George Black with him. So they came and sat on the front row - nobody in the theatre, just them, me and John [?] and I sang and danced for them. 'Come to the office', he said. So afterwards I went to the office and he said, 'Well, there's nothing happening at the moment but if you could...you've just missed Strike a New Note at the Prince of Wales. It's on. You've missed that but there is a show called Get a Load of This at the Hippodrome now. In a few months, it's going on tour. I'll see what I can do. So do something else in the meantime.

SB: Oh right.

AW: So for a couple of months I did some ENSA.

SB: Oh did you?

AW: Yes.

SB: And did you enjoy that?

AW: Oh, yes. I did love it. Yes. So one morning there was a phone call, where we were all staying - a unit of about half a dozen in this - my mother on the phone from Blackpool saying 'I've opened the letter, it was quite alright. You're going into Get a Load of This. Start rehearsals in three weeks.

SB: Oooh.

AW: For George Black. And I had a lovely part - have you ever heard of Celia Lipton, at all?

SB: Oh, yes.

AW: Well, she was the Leading Lady in the show and I got her part, right away!

SB: Did you?

AW: Yes.

SB: Gosh!

AW: And off I went.... the most glamorous show. Fantastic. And from then on, I was at rehearsals one day and this man came up to me and he said, 'If anybody's interested in you don't take any notice, I'll take care of you from now on, I'll be your agent and it was someone called Ronnie Blackie. Have you heard of him?

SB: Oh yes, Blackie.

AW: So that was it! So I was very lucky really.

SB: Maybe you were just very good!

AW: Pardon?

SB: You were probably very good!

AW: Yes? [Both laugh] So that was it! Looking back I think I was very lucky.

SB: Mmm.

AW: To have just dropped.... in that very moment that, that show was going out and then it did happen.

SB: That was great.

AW: It was a lovely show. So then after that I went back into pantomime again for Francis Laidler..... in Bradford..... Princes in Aladdin and the next show Gangway for George Black....Jill Manners was the Star and Ted Ray. But it was a beautiful show.

SB: Was it?

AW: Yes, it was a lovely show. That was a touring show but about a month in every place.

SB: Oh that's good.

AW: Yes.

SB: So when you were touring, how did you travel? Did you go by train or car?

AW: Train....always, all together by train. Yes. Which was fun really. Yes.

SB: And did you sort of have to change trains? And all that kind of thing?

AW: Not really. Not change. Not a lot, no. In those days the trains always seemed to go through Crew..... One show and that show.... 'Where are you going this week?'. 'Oh I've been there last week'. You know.....

SB: Really.

AW: It was really good fun.

SB: Yes.

AW: And after that I still kept in touch with Webster Booth and Ann Ziegler. They used to write to me....and Christmas cards and all that.... and they knew Arthur too, you see.

SB: And the other thing is.... When you were on tour, what sort of digs did you stay in?

AW: Digs?

SB: Yes.

AW: Oh luckily very nice ones.

SB: Were they?

AW: Yes. Very rarely sort of bad ones. No, all quite nice, yes.

SB: and did you get full board or....bed and breakfast or...?

AW: Yes, yes mostly, they provided meals too, sometimes.... but mostly....it's different today. It was nice then, there wasn't so much danger. When I think about.... When I used to be alone...floating around and walking home from theatres at night to different kinds of digs....wherever it was....you couldn't do that today.

SB: No.

AW: I was only about 19 [years old] or 20 [years old].... I know I was a very young 19 [years old] or 20 [years old] but you couldn't today, it's too dangerous. But you could then and I enjoyed it all so much.

SB: So what did you do after you did that second show? What happened next?

AW: Well, After Gangway...that ran from about April to Christmas nearly, then went back into the pantomime...to Manchester that time...for Francis Laidler again. Oh, I forget now, no I did a panto...the first time I worked for the George Black Organisation I went into Finsbury Park with Cinderella.

SB: Oh did you?

AW: Yes, it was lovely too! [Laughs].

SB: Who was Buttons?

AW: Oh...er...Oh dear, who was Buttons? [Laughs] Somebody quite well-known.... I didn't know him, he was quite oldish at the time....but he was quite well-known at the time but what was his name? My memory.... Nat Jackley's uncle.... Or something like that...yes.

SB: Oh....

AW: Yes, so..... I was very lucky really; I worked with some very nice people.

SB: Did you?

AW: Yes, I did.

SB: Who.... So you did the pantomimes and those shows and how did you come to meet Arthur?

AW: Well, now, I'm glad you asked me that because... this sounds like... if it was in a film...you'd never believe it. Well, I was in a show in Blackpool at the Grand Theatre, for Tom Arnold, called Hoopla. It was taken from a radio show with a lot of people in it, called Hoopla and they put it on the stage....

SB: Oh really?

AW: A lovely Leading Lady called Polly Ward.

SB: Oh yes!

AW: Polly Ward. She was a lovely person. And Harry Lester and his Hayseeds. [?] Harold Berens, Rob Wilton, who was a lovely man, a charming man and.... Let me see...what was I saying?

SB: How you first met Arthur.

AW: Oh yes! Well, strangely enough I was just.... It was just at the start of that season.... Which was 1945 into 1946 and the previous year in the George Black show, there was a man of all trades, at the back...taking care of backstage called Wilf Crew. He did everything backstage, you know and he was a very nice man and so...that was all really....and then the next show I went into, this Grand Theatre show called Hoopla where I lived in Blackpool... suddenly Wilf appeared...Wilf Crew. I said, 'What are you doing here?'. I hadn't seen him for over a year! He said, 'Oh, I'm working backstage at the Central Pier, it's a lovely show'. He said, 'Would you like to come to the matinee? We open this week. Would you like to come to the matinee on Wednesday? I said, 'Well, alright...thank you. Alright'. So... well, you're never going to believe it. So I went and met him outside the Central Pier entrance and he took me in, into the audience and we sat there and that was all. And I said 'It's very nice to see you again, Wilf. What a surprise to see you again'. So the show started and they did it in Pierrot costumes. And all the men in the show were in a group on one side of the stage and all the ladies on the other side. Now, this is quite true.... I knew a few of the men in that show but I didn't notice... and I noticed this very tall, thin young fellow and I looked at him and I thought 'Well, he looks taller than all the others and so thin... youngish.... and that was all. Now, the opening finished and the show started. Now, about five minutes I'd say.... Now you may not believe this, I don't quite believe it myself but it's true, I swear, I knew, right away, there was a set-up!

SB: Oh, Really?

AW: I did! I did! I thought 'This is a set-up!'. Why? - Because I'd never set eyes on him before. I was with Crew who I hadn't seen for ages. But I knew! And he came up, up the centre aisle towards.... I was sitting on the first one in... and Wilf was sitting on the aisle seat here...and he stopped. This is quite true and Wilf said, 'Hello, Arthur' he said. 'Oh, Audrey this is Arthur. Arthur this is Audrey'. And we said, [whispers] 'How do you do, hello', in the semi darkness. And that was it! And about a year went by and he phoned up for a date! [Both laugh]. And that's how it started.

Course, knowing Arthur... it was about six months each time before he made a date ...and then months went by and then he asked me to lunch in Blackpool where all... lunching together in Hill's Restaurant... and it was very nice and that was it. 'Thank you very much. Bye bye!'. So, that's Christmas of the same year I was in Nottingham in p.... I was at the Theatre Royal, Nottingham for....what was the subject? Humpty Dumpty I was the Principal Girl in it. So the phone rang once.... during the evening show about a couple of weeks after it opened.... in January, and I answered it and he said, 'This is Arthur Worsley'. Could you book me a seat to come and see the show tomorrow night?'. from Manchester, so I did. And that was that.

SB: So did you see him then?

AW: It's unbelievable, isn't it?

SB: Yes. So how long, after you first met him, did you marry him?

AW: Well, a few years! [Both laugh]. Well, we all met up in different ways, you see. He was in Variety... which.... I was in shows, you know, so of course it was bit...a few months actually.... every few months...

SB: So did you see him work? I mean did you.....

AW: No, I didn't actually see him work but I saw him on television.

SB: Oh really?

AW: Yes, yes. But.... so, he came over to see the show in Nottingham and he took me to the front gate and he kissed me....and that was it!

SB: Yes.

AW: And then he would come... well, it was about three years before we got married. Well, because we were different....you know, it was difficult to get to see anybody in different shows.

SB: Whereabouts was he born and brought up?

AW: He was born in Failsworth in Manchester.

SB: Oh right.

AW: and he grew up there and he was just a little boy when he settled with his grandmother just outside Blackpool – I didn't know him then, of course.... Since he was about three or four, his mother was very ill, something like that and his grandmother took care of him just for a few years and then he went back to Manchester.

[DELETE from HERE: and sometime during that time, on the sands there, one day, I believe, with his grandmother, he saw a ventriloquist who used to work up step-ladders in those days, with a megaphone...

SB: Oh really!

AW: with a dummy.... up on the step-ladder...like, you know 'Come on, hello...'. And he saw one of these ventriloquists and could never forget it and his father bought him an old, second-hand dummy and I've still got it.... upstairs now.... you must go upstairs...

SB: Yes.]

AW: I suppose, a lonely little boy really. He'd go to the village school and he just took and interest in it and used to climb up trees.... And climb up this tree and practice with this dummy and that's how he started. But when a little older he went back to Manchester to live with his mother and father and his father bought him a 'Charlie Brown'

SB: ooooh.

AW: And we still don't know how old he is or how....and that started and he started to go into competitions. 'Go as you please' at local theatres, in Manchester, you know. You get a little..... two or three guineas....for first prize. I've got the booklet at home. Such a date = 1 guinea = First Prize and all little things like that.

SB: Oh, that's lovely.

AW: So that's when he grew older and went professional.... But he was only 14 when he went professionally.... The youngest.... I've got things now.

SB: Oh really.

AW: The World's Youngest Boy Ventriloquist! And all this business. In London and everywhere. He was only young. He was doing well you know.

SB: So he had a very successful and long career, didn't he?

AW: Yes, very. He did have.

SB: Yes. So what made him.... What made you decide to come and live in Blackpool?

AW: Oh well, I don't really know, actually. I suppose we were going out together and finally got engaged and I suppose, really, with him... well, we were married about two years when I had Michael and up to then, we.... I sort of living at my mother's at the time because he used to be away an awful lot so it sort of blended in... to continue living there and then we sort of remained there.

SB: And did you decide to give up the Business because of having a son or...?

AW: Well, I had given up because I travelled around with Arthur then and it was all the time with him, you know and I never thought about going back actually and in any case I had Michael after we'd been married 11 months when I started to have Michael, so it never came...

SB: I mean, did you ever miss the fact that you weren't performing?

AW: Pardon?

SB: Did you miss not performing?

AW: I did, I did! I used to be backstage all the time and in the dressing room listening to the.... Of course, I didn't long for that because it was Variety and I'd never done that. Have you ever been in variety or... amongst it while it's been happening? Because it's a strange...

SB: Yes.

AW: And sometimes you don't know anybody on the bill and then there is and it's 'Hello' and you have someone to chat to. But most often than not their all.... Well, they were to me... strangers, you know.

SB: Yes, because you were used to production numbers and....

AW: Yes, when you were all one family... and pantomime.

SB: Yes.

AW: Yes, it's a different.... But Arthur thought it was.... Oh, he loved that! So that's how we came to live in Blackpool and then, of course, he started going abroad a lot and it was lovely for him. He did very well, you know. He was in a show in Blackpool at the Queen's Theatre and it went to London... of course, he had done lots of London dates.... Then, you know he did...well, he did everywhere. He did the Palladium – ten seasons there.

SB: At the Palladium?!

AW: Yes, and the Prince of Wales, he did a season and the Hippodrome when it was still a theatre and the Empire Leicester Square when it started Cine-Variety.

SB: Oh yes.

AW: He was in there and all the London theatres. He did well, he did really.

SB: Mmm. And the show that was at the Queen's, it went to London for a season, did it?

AW: Yes, it went to London for a season at the Victoria Palace.

SB: Oh yes.

AW: Now, when he was at the Victoria Palace in this show one of Ed Sullivan's...spies... what do you call them?

SB: Scouts?

AW: Scouts... was in and saw Arthur and booked him immediately for the Ed Sullivan Show... immediately! And then after that show finished, just before Christmas, he went and did the Ed Sullivan Show and that was it.

SB: So, you went to New York with him?

AW: Not then, no. I'd got Michael by then.

SB: Oh yes.

AW: So it wasn't 'til Michael was three that I went.... We went with Arthur for seven months..

SB: Seven months!

AW: Yes.... He did a few Ed Sullivan Shows at that time and did a lovely show in Beverley Hills... er.... Yes, Beverley Hills, a new Hilton Hotel and it was a lovely little hotel. It was... in a place called Westwood. Which was very highly thought of, it was very nice you know.... So it was a lovely hotel, not a big one... just a rather classy smaller one, so Arthur said, 'We'll stay here'. He'd got about eight weeks at the Beverley Hilton Show. So.. 'We'll stay here'. So, we did. So one day, during that, just a couple of weeks later, I started to notice Michael was in the pool having the time of his life, with a rubber ring round him for safety, you know and it was very, very hot. A heat wave, a terrible heat wave. I noticed he was playing and having a lovely time, just the two of them, a little girl about his size, his age and they were laughing together and chatting and I went back to my Arthur, sitting in this heat wave and he was sitting in the bath up to his throat. And of course, Arthur was always very, very thin and he said, 'Isn't it funny, fat people can go out and strip off but thin people always feel, sort of self-conscious. Why is that? So he would, so he sat in the bath up to his neck, smoking his cigar and reading a paper in cold water! So I said, 'I say, Michael's having a lovely time, a lovely time in the pool with a little girl. They are having the time of their lives, so at that time it [the news] was all about Rita Heyworth leaves Dick Hayes. Dick Hayes says, 'Where's Rita'. All this business going on, so I went into the hall to go back to the pool and the girl on the desk said, 'Come here!' We wrote to each other for quite a little while. She was a lovely girl. She said, 'Come here!'. I said, 'What?' She said, 'Do you know who moved in last night?'. I said, 'No. Who?'. She said, 'Rita Heyworth'. 'Really? Ahh.... That's Princess Yasmin, Michael is playing with [Both laugh].

SB: Oh really!

AW: It is and we were there for a month and we had to go and they were still there, but she was fairly quiet and she sort of kept out of the way because she said.... I spoke to her quite... I finished up going to sit with her once or twice. She said 'Won't you come and talk to me because I don't like to go out to the pool because, you know, people stare, you know, but in the night time... in the evening... she had this beautiful

Thunderbird, black, and we used to watch and wave Vroom [car sound] Up Westwood... in the evenings she used to go out but she'd stay in all the day long, but she was very quiet but shy in a way.

SB: Oh really. So Michael had a lot of fun then?

AW: Oh he did have a lot of fun. He did have a lot of fun with such a nice little kid. Such a scrawny little thing. And her sister was there too. Orson Welles was her father, the other one. The older one. But Ali Khan was the little one. I can hear them now calling 'Yassy'. They used to call her - Yasmin - and I used to sit and chat with her nursemaid by the pool sometimes.

SB: So you travelled with Arthur all the time.

AW: All the time then. Yes, well, when school holidays.... Away we'd go. Yes. Pack up everything and away we'd go. So he got to see Michael in the holidays. All the holidays. Yes.

SB: So did you usually stay in hotels or what?

AW: Yes...oh no, not all the time. Sometimes get a flat or something, like in the Isle of White. We had a very nice flat there. I loved it there. And room or sometimes hotels but nearly always in a little flat or whatever we could get.

SB: Mmmm. Well, I think.... I was just trying to think what else I wanted to ask you.

AW: Yes.

SB: So did you find.... Did Arthur miss being at home? And you were here with Michael?

AW: I don't think he did. He may have done a little.... But he was so used to it, I don't think he.... That was it, that was his way of life.

SB: Yes.

AW: He used to come and say... we'd wave him off. Sunday Concerts, of course, I used to go. I used to love it. Travelling with him, you know.

SB: Yes.

AW: I did. I loved it.

SB: So, and of course, he did try to get home whenever he could, didn't he?

AW: Pardon?

SB: He did try to get home whenever he could.

AW: Oh, well yes, but he was pretty steadily away but of course, we just accepted it. It had to be. I suppose I more or less brought up Michael on my own. Then of course, the holidays, it was the three of us.

SB: Well that was good. I was going to say...

AW: Pardon?

SB: I was just going to say thank you for talking to me.

AW: Oh, I've loved it. It brought it all back to me.

SB: Well, thank you.

AW: Not at all, Sue, it's been a pleasure talking to you and lovely to see you and be with you again, I mean that.... and your mum.

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