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Claudi Cairoli – interview transcript

Interviewer: Sue Barbour

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Child of Variety players; The Great Cingalee; circus; costume; De Vere dancers; Val Doonican; illusionists; learning acts; Paula Lee; Roy Lester; living arrangements; music; pantomime; Summer Seasons; stars; touring.

SB: This is Sue Barbour from the University of Sheffield. I am interviewing Claudi Cairoli. First of all, Claudi, I would like to ask you if agree to this recording being used for the British Library Theatre Project and to inform future generations about Variety Theatre.

CC: Yes, there's no problem with that.

SB: OK. The first thing I wanted to ask you was: Where were you born and brought up? And were you from a show business family?

CC: I was actually born in Leicester, by chance, and I was brought up in Blackpool and yes, in a show business family.

SB: OK. And were you born in Leicester because that's where your parents were working?

CC: I was born in Leicester because that's where my Dad's sister lived and he was on his way to Glasgow and I was due. So, they thought it was safer to leave my Mum there to make sure I was born safely than en route to Glasgow, so that's how that happened.

SB: And what are the first memories you've got about show business?

CC: Oh. [Pause] I've probably quite early memories to be honest with you because I remember my Granddad and he died when I was five. I can't actually remember seeing him work.

SB: What did he do?

CC: He did a big illusion act. In the day they were quite a few big illusion acts but they travelled their own scenery and everything.

SB: Right.

CC: So it was quite a big palaver. I can always remember their being things around the house and photographs and people talking about.... And meeting people from a very early age. I'd not a clue what they did but they were Uncle so and so and Auntie so and so and then I'd be shown photographs of these people and then my Mum starting, when my sister – she's two years younger – was old enough to be left with my Grandma, my Mum had taken over my Granddad's act.

SB: And what was your Granddad known as in the business?

CC: Cingerlee.

SB: Right. And then, your Mum was Paula.

CC: Paula Lee, yes. And.....

SB: So she did his act did she? More or less.

CC: Well, more or less but we're probably talking about the '60s now, so it was a toned down version because of the way that the business had evolved. But, she still used Granddad's props. A lot of his props. And my sister has since used, when she took over the act, she has used the props that my Granddad built.

SB: Really?

CC: Yes.

SB: That's nice.

CC: So, we still have those in the family.

SB: So, when you were young and your parents... now, tell me about your father?

CC: Oh, my Dad was a Comedian.

SB: And what was his name?

CC: Roy Lester. And his dad was a Comedian as well. And so we've a few generations on each side of the family.

SB: Oh really? So how did your parents meet?

CC: Well, my Dad was quite a lot older than my Mum. Nearly twenty years older than my Mum. So, he was actually friends with my Grandparents and they'd worked together an awful lot and my Mum and him got together quite out of the blue really, I think, when he realised she suddenly wasn't a little girl any more. She'd grown up. Yeh, and they were happily married until my Mum died, for 27... 28 years. 28 years.

SB: Oh, gosh. And did they work together much?

CC: They did work together quite a bit, yes. They worked separately... when I say separately, I mean individually, in a show with my Dad as a Comic and my Mum doing her act and then they would – when Mum worked... because her act was silent they worked abroad, but they would work my Mum's act and my Dad would assist my Mum's act which was quite unusual for a man to assist a women. It was normally the other way round. Yes, so they did quite a lot of work abroad and they worked like that.

SB: And did they..... how did they used to travel? Did they go by car or train or.... ?

CC: When we were little it was by car.

SB: Right.

CC: It was always by car. But, I obviously heard a lot of stories.... Meeting at Crew Station [Both laugh]. You know, with lots of other acts changing trains there to go off to the next venue and so....

SB: But, mostly because they had you....

CC: Yes.

SB: Who looked after you when they were working?

CC: My Grandma looked after us. We lived here in Blackpool and we had a house, not too far away from here now.

SB: Really?"

CC: Yes and Nanny looked after us while Mum and Dad travelled..... We travelled with them, you know... when we were tiny we travelled with them and when it was possible and our Nan travelled with us. Even when my Granddad was working and I was a baby. We've got lots of pictures of me sitting on the dressing room tables and being cuddled back stage by different people. But then, when I got to school age I stayed at home and my Nan looked after us and she used to whip us on trains then, backwards and forwards to Mum and Dad, wherever they were.

SB: And so you used to spend holidays with your parents, did you?

CC: Yes. Yes, holidays. Yes.

SB: Do you have any memories of any particular places?

CC: Ooo, yes, quite a few Pantomimes and Summer Seasons. Nice, sunny places. They always seemed to be sunny, Summer Seasons. Yeh. Porthcawl and Weymouth and Brighton. You know, really nice places.

SB: Yes.

CC: Great, when you were kids. Just great. Southport.

SB: What did you used to do when they were in the show? Did you stay back stage?

CC: We stayed back stage, tried to behave ourselves as best we could and that's actually where we learned an awful lot of things. We'd watch the acts that we really liked and we'd watch the dancers and we'd learn to do things. People would actually teach us things. You know, if you showed an interest somebody would show you what to do and there wouldn't be any "Oh, they might grow up and take over our act. It wouldn't be anything like that. They would just be happy to teach somebody that was interested. So, you picked up a lot of skills just by being on holiday with your Mum and Dad, when you were little.

SB: Yes.

CC: Mmm. Yes. I started to juggle when I was tiny like that and I don't think I'd had a dancing lesson until we'd done a Summer Season and I was old enough and the girls used to limber up with.... Ronnie De Vere girls who used to do Ballet Montmartre, then Ballet Montparnasse. They used to sort of do the Can Can and then they flying splits and they had to limber up a lot and that's when we started to do it and they never objected these little girls. We were probably quite a nuisance really but they taught us how to limber up properly and then we went to dancing lessons when we got home from that. We learned an awful lot.

SB: And did you, when your parents, when you went to the Summer Seasons and Pantomimes etc. What kind of accommodation did they have?

CC: Oh, we had a caravan.

SB: Oh, you did.

CC: Yes, we had a caravan yes. Occasionally, just depending on.... Christmas more than anything.... With Pantomime, if we couldn't get any caravan site that was near enough or open because of the time of year, we would get a flat. But, more often than not we were in the caravan.

SB: Right. So that was like a home from home?

CC: That was. Yes. Yeh.

SB: And so when you were travelling around..... did you intend to go in the business? I mean, were you aware that you would go into show business?

CC: No, I don't think I was, to be honest. My sister, that's all she ever wanted to do. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. Until I'd done my GCSE's – well, GCE's then – and then I suddenly thought, I can't face another day of studying [Both laugh]. And I'd already said to my Mum and Dad, they were.... funnily enough they were at Southport that season when I left school with Stan Stennet and my Mum said, "Well...." And I'd worked Pantomime at Bath with my Mum and...just assisting her in the act.

SB: Yes.

CC: And I'd had to take extra work and I'd had to go into the theatre at nine o'clock every bloomin' morning, do two or three hours revision and write all this work out to go back, which the teacher never even looked at when I got back to school..... because we'd had time off to be able to do the full run of the Pantomime.

SB: Yes.

CC: So, I did it. I was told to do it and I did it. And I think, then, that's when I thought, "Ooo, there's a bit more to life than going back to study, so I went into the act and I decided that was it for me.

SB: And what year was that?

CC: That would have been in..... see, I'm fifty-three now... what would that have been? 1972?

SB: Yes.

CC: Yes, 1972. So, that would be Summer Season 1972. And of course then, once I was in the show. Or, we were in.....my sister went back to school. We were in shows and we were doing more than just helping Mum out... we were actually working – doing tricks in the act, ourselves, by this time - we had to do other things. We did production and so that's when we started to try and sing, and our little bit of dancing came in [Both laugh]. Anything else you could do – if you could play an instrument! So things like that came in then.

SB: Did you play an instrument?

CC: The Ukulele!

SB: Did you!?

CC: [Laughs]. Yes. Very badly, but I did.

SB: When did you start to learn that?

CC: Em... probably about ten or eleven and that would be back stage to keep us occupied, to be honest with you. Somebody would have a guitar too big for you to play so I think we got.... My Dad found us two ukuleles and we started to play those and that was it. We learned to sequin our costumes... the same situation... people would be, in-between acts, making new costumes and that's how we picked up the skills to do something like that as well.

SB: The first time I saw you, was sewing costumes!

CC: Oh, was I [Both laugh].

SB: Yes. In the caravan in Ayre.

CC: Yes. That sound's about right. Yes.

SB: So, did you have any other family members in the business?

CC: No we hadn't, to be honest with you. My Dad... his sister had died quite early on.

[Pause for Son's entrance]

SB: The other thing I wanted to ask you was: Did you have any.... Did you make friends with any other theatre children or 'Children of Variety?'"

CC: Children of... Yes, I think we did. Probably children of Circus more than... so much Variety. I mean, yes. No! When I think about it...John Boulter's daughter's Phillipa and Francesca, we worked with both of those and made friends and Dickie Valentine's daughter, Kim.

SB: Oh right.

CC: Yeh. Yes, there were a few people like that. And, Stan Stennet's children. K

SB: And what about Circus. What ..?

CC: Yes, the Robert's family and the Chipperfield's because we were of an age of Delbosks? Yeh, an awful lot of children. Enos family, Pam Enos is a friend of mine. Oh, yes.

SB: And that was when your parents were working with them. Is that how you met them?

CC: Yes. That's right. I mean, some of them were already working.

SB: Right.

CC: So, I mean, actually they may have been a little bit older or had been working because they'd been trained from an earlier age. That they were already working in the

act so, yeh. A lot of friends that did the same sort of thing. But, you feel like you're a different breed in a way. I know that sounds a silly thing to say but when you went back to school your friends.... The people that you knew and you mixed with, didn't seem quite right because the children that you met on holiday which...they're parents were working.... You always had that common thread. Even if some of them were determined that they were never going to go in the business, we still had this common thread. That kept us together.

SB: Mmm.

CC: And you always felt that little bit different. I mean, we didn't go to a stage school, we went to an ordinary school. I think if you'd been to... Children who'd been to a stage school perhaps feel different again because they have a common thread.

SB: And what did the children at school think of you?

CC: They thought we were a bit strange, to be honest [Both laugh]. Ah. Yes. And sometimes you didn't always tell people what you're mum and dad did, because that was a bit sort of... they thought you were... well, an odd bod. You know.

SB: Yes.

CC: And you would never... I can always remember Mum doing a Rolf Harris television and... I mean, I was.... it must have been forty five years ago, something like that and that was one of the programmes, it was a children's programme with Koochie Bear and the little Leprechaun and I wouldn't tell anyone that my Mum had been on that, I was so embarrassed. I wasn't embarrassed because of what my Mum did, I just didn't want anyone else to say, "Oh, look what her mum does! It's terrible, have you seen it. Never seen anything like it" and it was the same with my husband as well, you know. And our boys have, sadly, been called Clown Boy before now and you know things like that. They get over it but I think, if you've been brought up in the business you do feel a little bit different. Mmm. You do yes.

SB: Yes, I think that's true. [Both laugh]. Do you remember meeting any other performers, anybody famous, that kind of thing. The sort of Tops of the Bills anywhere or did they mostly work within a show where everybody was equal?

CC: They did some of that, yes, they did do some of that work. Most of the time when people were equal but we did work with other people but I think probably.... Bob Monkhouse and... but they're people now that....they were Stars when we were little probably people maybe wouldn't know them so much now, I don't know. Roy Orbison.

SB: You worked with Roy Orbison.

CC: Well, my Mum did. Worked with Roy Orbison, when we were tiny. But, that was cabaret. Well, you see we did quite a bit of cabaret. Or, my Mum and Dad did but you see, even then we were in tiny dressing rooms there. I mean, I can remember Keith Harris, who's not an awful lot older than me. We were probably like twelve and fourteen and his Mum, Lyla? was with him and he was about eighteen and that was in somewhere around Birmingham – Solihull – with a cabaret.

SB: Was it like La Reserve or The Cresta Club?

CC: Yes, it was! Yes, The Cresta. Something like that. And also working with people that probably went on to make names for themselves. Where, at the time they were probably on a level with us and, you know they were suddenly Stars. Val Doonican, we worked with Val Doonican but they just seemed normal. Yeh. When you met them it wasn't like they were sort of elite and kept out of the way. Not many people. You'd get one or two but not many. Most of them would be just normal and speak to you as anybody would speak to you. And treat you like that and that was nice.

SB: I was going to say, when you were a little child did you realise – I know earlier on you said you weren't quite sure what other people did but did you realise what your what your parents did or what your Granddad and your Mum, early on.... ? I mean, you knew that they did magic and shows, did you?

CC: Yes. And I think when you're younger it doesn't bother you so much, which is quite nice. It's only when you get to a certain age you get... "Oh, dear"... but yes, I did realise and that was nice, even though I wasn't sure I wanted to do it... it was still nice. I wouldn't change anything.

SB: No.

CC: I wouldn't change anything.

SB: So, do you think it was in your teens that it was a bit...

CC: Yeh. Teenagers are like that now, aren't they?

SB: Yes.

CC: They don't want to talk to you or anything. I think that it was just the normal teenage syndrome that we went through but yes, but then you end up... you get through that and you come out feeling quite proud of your Mum and Dad being different and quite proud of what you've learned from them and the things you're going on to do yourself.

SB: Yes. And did you ever collect autographs and things like that?

CC: Yes.... I've got some nice autographs. Yes. Bob Monkhouse, Lulu.... I'm trying to think of who else now. People that Mum and Dad worked with when they were doing.... Travelling around.... All the Spesh acts like Senor Wences and you know, people like that and little photographs. Lots of people seemed to give out little photographs with their autograph. But, quite a lot of those, yes.

SB: So, you look back. Do you remember any bad points?
Or do you look back on it quite fondly?

CC: I do look back on it fondly, yes and I can't remember.... I think the bad points, to be honest with you, were when we came back home from our holidays and we missed Mum and Dad. They were the hard things.... To get back. I think, the one thing it does – being brought up in the business – it does... you learn to adjust to whatever life throws at you later on in life because you have to, from a child you do. From childhood you're constantly adjusting. There is a consistency to a degree but then there's always the little blips, like the holidays..... excitement of going away to see everybody then having to come back and leaving the friends that you've made. That you don't know.... When you're going to see those people again and sometimes it's the following year and sometimes it's ten years later and you think, "Oh, golly, I can't believe it's such a long time. So they were the hard things but it does toughen you up to adjusting into what life throws at you. Which I don't think is a bad thing.

SB: No. And did you find when you met up with these people again, it was like you've never been apart?

CC: Oh, yes. Yeh. Without doubt.

SB; So, on the whole you've got positive ...

CC: Very positive. Very positive memories, yes.

SB: OK. Well, I think I've asked all I need to so, is there anything you want to add to it?

CC: No. I've really enjoyed this. It's been lovely.