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## David Berglas – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Sue Barbour**

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Magician. Auditioning; Kenny Baker; BBC; Burton Brown; Roy Castle; digs; Elizabeth and Collins; Carroll Gibbons and the Savoy Orchestra; Lew and Leslie Grade; hypnosis; Dean Martin; Meet David Berglas; Ruby Murray; Nationwide psychological experiments; Picture Post magic stunt; The Three Hellos; touring; Dickie Valentine; visits South Africa; Ronnie Waldman; Windmill Theatre.

SB: This is Sue Barbour from the University of Sheffield interviewing David Berglas and, first of all, David I would like to ask you if you are in agreement for us to use this recording for the British Library Theatre Project and for use for future generations to learn about Variety Theatre?

DB: Of course I am, depending on what you ask me but so far I am happy to sign it.

SB: OK. First of all perhaps you could tell me a little bit about your background; where you were born?

DB: Well, I never give a straight answer to that because it's a bit complicated. It's a bit like asking somebody, "Where were you born?" and they say in "China" because their parents happened to be in China at the moment and as a baby they were brought over and for the rest of their lives they have to say they were born in China and they say, "Oh, you're Chinese". "No, I'm not!" So I have to tell you that my Grandparents, my father's parents, were from Poland and my mother's parents from Russia and my father was born in a country between Austria and Czechoslovakia, which doesn't exist anymore. My mother was from Lithuania. They had three children, my sisters and myself, and we were born in three more countries and so we were very multi-national. I have twenty-six first cousins, out of which we have eleven nationalities, just from my first cousins, so, it does get a bit complicated. But we happened to have a family business, which was all over Europe and we found ourselves in Germany just before the big World War and so we had to escape because of the Nazis. My sister went to Holland with my mother. My older sister was sent to Switzerland. My father was running around - practically trying to sort things out - and I was put on a train, all by myself and I was about eleven years old and sent through France to pick up a ferry in Calais to Dover and travelled by train to London and then I was met by a business friend of my father's and he took me to a co-educational school in Surrey, where I stayed for four years. And so my background is very mixed and my education came from six different schools in six different countries.

SB: Oooo. Oh, my goodness. So, you were in England and did anybody...I mean, how did you come to be in Show Business?

DB: Well, after I went to the school, we lived in Surrey for a while and then I was supposed to go to my parent's business which was textiles but I wanted to get into the war, especially because of the experiences that I had and I volunteered to go into the air force but they found out I had put my age up to get in so they said I could stay in the air force but I wouldn't be allowed to fly and I thought, "Oh, that's why I wanted to join", and then I heard that the American army was looking for people who could speak different languages and who had some military training and so I joined [the American army, with Officer's status, working in an intelligence unit in London], going behind the German lines and working... and being trained in France and staying in Germany for eighteen months until just after the war when I came back to London. I tried to go into the family business - didn't quite work out. There was a textile slump in those days, in the late 1940s and purely by chance, I'd been sent up to Bradford to a technical college, in Yorkshire to learn textiles and there I was invited to come to a magical meeting because I'd borrowed some costumes for a Rag Day. It was pure coincidence. I saw a magician performing in front of some others - a dealer - and I was fascinated and magic became a very absorbing hobby for about four years. So, it was such an absorbing hobby that I went to a different magic club every night in London and went to see Variety shows where magicians were on and then I went to some of the International conventions and just got completely absorbed with it. And then, because things weren't happening - and I had no intention of ever going into Show Business, that was just not in my mind at all because it was a hobby - I had been studying psychotherapy, specialising in suggestion and hypnosis, relaxation techniques and so on - I went on a ship to South Africa because somebody had told me that it was sunny there, we still had rationing, they didn't, they had beautiful food and flowers and sunshine and it all appealed to me. So, I took the little money I'd saved and took the worst cabin in the ship, right in the hold and they didn't have air-conditioning, they didn't have stabilisers. It took two weeks from Southampton to Cape Town but on the way they tend to show a film on board ship and the cinema.... the projector broke down and they were looking for talent from different passengers to put on a show and somebody said, "Oh, this young man does some very nice magical tricks" and I explained, "That's much too small to entertain a big crowd of about four or five hundred people". But, I said I would give a talk on hypnosis and they accepted that. But that talk turned into a two-hour demonstration!

SB: [Laugh].

DB: And suddenly, everybody on board seemed to be ill! There was a psychological problem of some kind and [they]crowded round me and I happened to, purely by chance, besides helping a lot of people, I treated a lady who hadn't been able to walk. She was carried on the ship - virtually - going to see her sister in Cape Town, to die, the last few months of her life - and I made her better and we even danced on the last night. And when I arrived, this had been radioed ahead of me and there was a big press conference, wanting to talk about this and I had no intention of becoming a stage hypnotist or anything of that nature, so I fended them off by saying, "No, no, but magic is my hobby", and it all sort of died down. Although, I still have all the newspaper

cuttings and the headlines. And then I tried various things for three months. Like - I was a lifeguard on the beach, I played in a band. I used to play in bands in England. I was doing all kinds of odd jobs. Selling cars and just a lot of menial jobs and I was quite broke and somebody said, "You're very foolish, you had all that publicity, why don't you give a talk on hypnosis?" I rented a small lecture hall, which was filled to capacity and my demonstration became front-page headlines. I wasn't a stage hypnotist, had never intended to be. But, I then got involved with the medical world in Cape Town. Doctors came to consult me, they sent me patients, I had to go to hospital, so after a few months I set up a psychotherapeutic practice which became very successful and I worked there for about a year and a half, and in between, gave demonstrations on hypnosis and that gave me the first experience of being on the stage and handling volunteers and talking to people but they were all serious lectures, although they were entertaining to watch, with no intention of Show Business. I came back to England, which is what I intended to do, to go back into the family business - It just didn't work out - literally a few weeks only. But, I had this burning desire to build a very advanced magic act. I spent all the money I'd saved on this particular act where everything happened in a flash. You know..... when I threw my hat into the air it burst into flames. I vanished my gloves. Producing doves. I had a girl assistant. It was a very advanced act, all based on electronics.

SB: When was this?

DB: That was 1950. I spent a year and a half in South Africa that was 1949 – 1950 and then in 1950 when I came back, I built this act but it was far too complicated for Variety because it took two hours to prepare and you know Variety is twice nightly. So, I had - various things happened - [I] took different jobs. Magic still remained a hobby and a couple of years later – I've skipped some things that I did then, which is not so important for this interview. I was asked by the famous magazine, Picture Post, to do something for them, as a challenge. They said, "Now, we've heard you do all kinds of unusual things. If we challenge you and find out how you do it, we're going to print that but if you fool us and we don't know how you did it we will also print that". But what they did was; they hid an object somewhere here in London. I was blindfolded and then, with a celebrity committee, for two and a half hours I was driven around London dictating where they should go and eventually I found it. It was a ladies Chinese slipper in a canvas bag, underneath a flagpole in the middle of a boating pond at Battersea Park [SB: laughs] and this caused a tremendous sensation and they had a monetary prize for people to write in [to say] how they think...." how it could have been done, but of course, nobody solved it. But, through that everyone said you're now a star because everybody has read about you but of course a nightclub owner wouldn't necessarily book you as a magician just because you found a hidden object somewhere! [Both laugh]. So, nothing happened! But Brian Johnson, the famous cricket commentator and later on, Head of Light Entertainment at the BBC, went into a hairdresser nine months later and picked up an old copy of Picture Post, got fascinated with that, got someone to contact me because they wanted to make a programme about the paranormal and they thought, "This man must know something about that". And they asked me if I wanted to do three or four half hour shows, on the radio. And I said, "Yes". And it so happened they never came up because Brian Johnson was sent to India to cover The Ashes at that time but his secretary remembered me and when a very famous act called The Piddington's, that you may have heard of?

SB: Yes, I've heard of them.

DB: – it was a husband and wife, mind-reading act from Australia, who absolutely baffled everybody and it was front page headlines wherever they went and they were suddenly upset because a particular magician said they were fake, not genuine, and they'd never made any claims, it was one of those things that they said, "We'll leave it to you" ... to the audience. So, they went back to Australia so the BBC was completely stuck for a large chunk of an hour's Variety programme on a Saturday night. They had already planned for them to have this mystery spot and then, that secretary of Brian Johnson remembered seeing me and had them audition me and they called me. I had to do an audition. It was Bob Monkhouse and his partner, Dennis Goodwin at the time who had a lunchtime programme, they used that audience and it was Bob Monkhouse that said, "You've got the right sort of voice and the right attitude, I think, you'll go far". I didn't believe him, it seemed incongruous for a magician to start doing a radio series but I started a long series. It was twelve at a time, they were the top Variety programmes on a Saturday night, every Star appeared in them and I appeared every week and caused a tremendous sensation with some of the things I did. I did what they called 'Nationwide Psychological Experiments' where I got people in their homes to put objects in front of them and I would say what they'd picked up and each week I would predict something but I also did a big stunt every week. For instance, one of my stunts that was talked about a lot was... I hung a box over Regent Street, near Piccadilly, rather like the Christmas decorations hanging right across Regent Street, that was sealed by the Diplomatic Corps to make sure that nobody could get to it. They had sealed it and made sure it was empty and then at one of the radio broadcasts at the Playhouse Theatre on the Embankment, I had somebody chosen from the audience in the fairest possible way by throwing a ball over my shoulder. That person came up and I said, "Have you got anything to identify yourself, like a driving license on you?" He happened to have a passport on him, which was ideal. The details were taken from the passport. This was all before the broadcast started. The passport was hung in an envelope on a bit of string right in mid-air so the audience could keep their eye on it and then during the broadcast we explained what had happened. When they lowered the string and opened the envelope, the passport had gone. We had an outside broadcast unit in Regent Street and when they had broken the seals and hauled the box in, which was on a pulley system and they'd broken the seal on the box, opened it and there was a passport inside it...

SB: Oh, my Gosh!

DB: And to prove it, the man who owned the passport asked various questions that we hadn't written on the blackboard to prove that they really had it in front of them and I started doing stunts of that nature all the time, later on, on Television, so I made a reputation for myself in that way. But, my first big impact was radio when we had thousands and thousands of people listening – very few people had television.

SB: Mmm.

DB: And then of course I got into television and it was by chance and I got quite a few guest appearances on different Variety shows and then I went to see a man called Ronnie Waldman who used to have a programme called 'Monday Night At Eight'. It was

a quiz programme and he became the Head of Light Entertainment at the BBC and he came to the Magic Circle to give a talk on what television is like for magicians and he recognised me because I had done two or three small shows but I didn't really get to know him. But, I had the cheek to pick up the phone the next day and phone his secretary and say, "I saw Ronnie last night...." [SB: laughs]. Not Mr. Waldman.... "I saw Ronnie last night and he'd like to see me but I'm rather busy this week so I can't manage it", so she said, "When can you manage?" I said, "Possibly next week". She said, "Well, he's got a lunch time appointment but he could see you between 12.30pm and 1pm" and, of course, she thought it was all something that he'd requested. I went to the BBC and she'd said, "Remember, he's only got a half an hour before his lunch appointment". Well, all I can tell you is....I must have said something of interest because at 1pm he picked up the phone, cancelled his luncheon appointment and said, "Don't put any calls through!" and I left the office at three O'clock with a television series!

SB: Oh my goodness!

DB: It was called 'Meet David Berglas' It was – this is roundabout 1954 – where I had the idea of having celebrities sitting around me, in a drawing room setting, which was quite unusual for those days and I would puzzle my guests and that format was copied by some other people years later but that was my first series – called 'Meet David Berglas' and as you know, we didn't have video recorders in those days so there was a photographer that would sit in front of his television set with an automated camera and he could press a button like a bulb and he could take as many as ninety photos during a five minute period, so I have a whole lot of strips of these shows, which are not animated but in miniature, photos which could then be enlarged. So I was very lucky that for my first sixty or seventy television shows, I actually recorded a lot of photo prints.

SB: Mmmm.

DB: He was quite [innovative], other artists used him as well so that was a good record to have. And then, I started getting television series all over Europe and in Holland, I actually introduced the very first video recorder called Sony but, going back.... In about 1952 Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis appeared at the London Palladium, as a double act, and in those days there weren't many places to eat late at night and there was a club called 'The Jack of Clubs' run by a man called Harry Green and all the stars used to go there, like Johnny Ray, Danny Kaye, Bob Hope, whoever appeared at the London Palladium, they'd go there. And I had become friendly with Harry Green because he was an amateur magician and he used to love playing tricks on people by making them take a card, then I would tell them what they'd taken and visa versa and that's how I got introduced to Dean Martin and Dean was fascinated with my card work because he used to be a dealer in a Casino before he became a singer and comedian and he could appreciate the handling of the cards and he thought I was in Show Business and he said, "Who's your agent?" and I said, "I don't have an agent, I don't have an act! [SB: laughs] I don't have any intention of being in Show Business". He said, "Oh, you have to be! You're fantastic!". It so happened that the big band, Les Brown, I think they were called

SB: Mmm. Les Brown.

DB: They had a big, big band. They were backing at the Palladium and Les Brown had a brother called Burton Brown and Burton Brown had stayed after he himself had appeared as a pianist somewhere, stayed back in London, became an agent and worked for Lew and Leslie Grade and so Dean Martin, especially gave a party backstage at the Palladium to introduce me to his bandleader's brother Burton Brown. He gave me the nod and said, "Now, do something!" There were a lot of people there so I started working feverishly, trying to impress people and Dean went over to Burton Brown and said, "Well, what do you think of him?" and Burton said, "Oh, I didn't watch!" He said, "We've got a whole list of magicians we book, they're not all working, why would I want another one?" So both Dean and I were a little disappointed but Burton Brown did take my details and about six months later he telephoned me. He said, "Would you like to do an audition at The Windmill? Well, not being in Show Business, that didn't mean anything to me. I said, "Yes" but I didn't realise the importance of it and I had a private audition, which was very unusual.

SB: Mmm, Mmm

DB: So I was working to two or three people. Vivienne Van Damn who owned The Windmill, and I went along and it was just after my Picture Post stunts had broken and after a few minutes I was doing some manipulation in a spotlight and a voice boomed from the darkness, "Thank you, we've seen enough" and I assumed he meant, "Thank you, we've seen enough, we can't use you" [SB: laughs] and Burton Brown said, "David, tell 'em about the Picture Post article", so I leant over the footlights and just talked into the dark auditorium – there was only about three people there and told them what I had just done and he said, "Very interesting but we're really not too worried about that because you're starting on Monday!"

SB: Oh, no!

DB: Yes, and I said, "What do you mean?" and he said, "Well, we like the act and you start Monday!" Anyway, I did. And I did six shows a day for six weeks, so six shows a day, six days a week for six weeks that's 218 performances plus rehearsals and it was very good schooling because none of the men who came to The Windmill came to see the Speciality Acts, you know, they came to see the girls and I must say, that was a very good experience and from there three weeks later I was at the very sophisticated booking in London, The Savoy Hotel, where they had a whole troupe of girls and a bicycle act, a big orchestra – an American orchestra – Caroll Gibbons and The Savoy Orchestra which were extremely well-known and because I had a foreign accent I had attended a few elocution lessons and one night I happened to be talking to the band leader.... Caroll Gibbons asked me what I was doing the next day and I told him I was going to have elocution lessons to try and get rid of my foreign accent and he said, "Don't you dare!" He said, "I've heard so many comments about your voice and also from the way you work that I .... They said, "Keep that voice!" .... I didn't do it on purpose but that's how it happened and so from The Savoy Hotel, which was a big jump, I then started doing Variety Shows. My first was at the Blackpool Palace in 1954, Top of the Bill was Bonar Colleano.

SB: Oh wow!

DB: I actually stayed with him and his wife Susan Shaw, who was an actress and unfortunately some years later he was killed in a car crash which was a big shock but he was a....he encouraged me tremendously and he told me what sort of an act I had and the way I could improve and two weeks after that, I appeared at the Finsbury Park Empire and in a moment, you and I are going to go into the hall because all up the stairs I have about sixty Box Office Cards, as you know, that hung in shop windows and advertised the shows and you had these eight, nine or ten artists that appeared on each show depicted on these Box Office Cards we used to give to shopkeepers. We said, "Will you hang this in your shop?" You'd get two or three tickets per person...

SB: Oh yes.

DB: .... to first house on a Monday, to get people in. Now, the surprising thing is, when I show you those Box Office Cards and I think there are about sixty there and I've got some more, that is only a three year period! When you look at those Box Office Cards you see it's only 1953, 1954 and 1955.

SB: Mmm.

DB: It was just towards the end of Variety days. Most of those places became Bingo Halls or Supermarkets or were knocked down so I was very lucky then to get the experience of all the Stolls and Moss Empires and played all the top ones with some of the biggest stars and I was also lucky that I got good billing right from the first because of my.... I became known through the radio and my television work, so I never started at the bottom I was sort of either Top of the Bill or second or third and worked with some terrific people. There's one very interesting poster I'll show you, in a moment, which is the first appearance of Ruby Murray. It was at the Bristol... I think, Bristol Hippodrome.... and Bernard Delfont, who was putting it on, was so worried that because she had never been on a Variety stage before but she had lots of hit records, you know 'Softly, Softly' and various other things like that which had been number one but she was very nervous and the management was very nervous and said that she wouldn't attract the people so they decided to put all Top of the Bills around her. So, on that bill, you will see, is Morecambe and Wise, is Norman Vaughn, is ... I should look at it now, I can't think of everybody but there are about six Top of the Bills all surrounding her, including myself right in the centre and... Jimmy Wheeler's the one I couldn't think of just now....

SB: Oh, yes.

DB: .... and Harry Worth all people who had Topped the Bills' themselves!

SB: Goodness.

DB: and I literally held her by the hand she was so nervous ..... but we have some interesting programmes there, where you'll see names like Des O'Connor very, very small [on the bill] Roy Castle very, very small. In fact, you told me a story when somebody said... I think you said Cliff Richard said he wouldn't do any more shows...

SB: Oh yes.

DB: and who was the other one?

SB: Des O'Connor.

DB: ...and Des O'Connor. Well, Roy said the same thing! Roy and I did a cabaret for Walt Disney who came over to London with his entourage. It was at one of the posh hotels in the West End of London. And because Roy was using the wrong material, he was talking about British stars and doing impersonations and telling jokes about politicians that they'd never heard of and he didn't do very well and he came off and said, "David, I will never ever do another cabaret in my life!" [Both laugh]. That was Roy Castle, who became one of our biggest stars, of course! But I have many, many stories as you can imagine from those days.

SB: Mmm.

DB: I remember them vividly, I remember the acts vividly. Every name that you see up there, there is a story attached to it.

SB: Yes. What Speciality Acts do you remember, really? I mean, unusual sort of acts?

DB: I became very friendly with lots of them. There was a wonderful act called Elizabeth and Collins. Do you remember that act?

SB: The name. Yes.

DB: Yes. Well, Elizabeth and Collins were, first of all charming people like most people but the act was just incredible. He was on a slack-wire as opposed to a taut wire.

SB: Yes.

DB: That means, once you're on the slack wire, it sways very, very fast, left to right. He is blindfolded and it's a knife-throwing act! She.... the only protection she has is like a fencing mask that she puts on herself and stands against a circular board, which then

suddenly starts spinning. So going round and he's throwing knives at her. Missing her by literally half an inch to an inch, all round her. Legs, arms, head, everywhere! That's bad enough because he's wobbling on one foot on this swaying wire and then there's a complete blackout and the knives are florescent and the outline of her is florescent and he's continued to throw these knives very fast and then the lights come on.

SB: Oh, my goodness!

DB: and it's all genuine. There was no trickery involved. They were charming people who became..... great friends. There was another act that I became friendly with called The Three Hellos, who were from Austria.

SB: Oh yes.

DB: They did a Bicycle Act. He would be able to balance on the bicycle so it looked like he was actually standing still and the other two would then climb up and do acrobatics on top of him and then cycling around..... and cycling..... they all had cycles ..... cycling in and out of each other. But, I worked with most of the Speciality Acts. The reason I mentioned The Three Hellos, and I'll mentioned one other act called Reg Russell and Suzie, which was a dog act,. Suzie was a dog that would bark out numbers and Reg Russell was the man behind it. Well, one of my big stunts that was televised and talked about... was a programme called 'In Town Tonight' You used to hear the traffic noise of Piccadilly and the flower lady calling out, "Violets, violets, lovely violets" and the newspaper boy shouting something out and the taxi horns making a noise and then there'd be a big booming voice saying "Stop!" and everything would go quiet and then the announcer would say "Once again, we stop the mighty roar of London's traffic to bring you some of the more interesting people in town tonight" and that was a radio programme for many years. Then, it was transferred to television where they had a film. An overhead film of Piccadilly.

SB: Mmm.

DB: And in those days the traffic went all the way around Eros, now it's a one way system and I re-created that as a magical stunt where we had live cameras looking over the buildings and down onto Piccadilly and I was down there somewhere and the commentator said, " Well, we don't know what David's going to do but he's down there somewhere" and when I called, "Stop!" everything stopped. All the cars and the cyclists, the pedestrians. There was a woman walking a dog who stopped with one leg cocked! [SB: laughs] and that was built on some of the people I'd met in Variety.... Because I had to set the whole thing up. Even the neon lights stopped at that moment. The Three Hellos, as I said....when I saw them being able to balance on the spot without apparently moving, he was one of the people there who stopped on the bike. It was a dog act from my Variety days that froze – where the lady's walking with the dog and he suddenly stops. I made a lot of taxi driver friends in my days because I was working at night at all the nightclubs – so we only needed two or three taxis and a couple of buses to stop because nobody behind them could move. Also, the neon lights, I could only

affect one but the camera was facing that way so it looked like everything had stopped – as you do on a film when you just stop a film but I did it live.

SB: Oh my gosh.

DB: And then they all come back slowly. First, somebody is walking, then the cyclist continues, then the buses continue and so on. It caused quite a sensation.

SB: Mmm, it would do.

DB: But that was based on the fact that I knew so many Speciality Acts and I, myself did some other speciality act. I was always a very good acrobat and at one time I did a trapeze act with a trapeze and a trampoline where two of us would be jumping up and down but we blacked out the top part of the stage so it looked like you suddenly disappeared. You actually landed on the trapeze and then you could do a costume change and come back and it looked very magical.

SB: Mmm.

DB: and very acrobatic. It didn't last very long and the other Variety act I did was with a little midget called Kenny Baker.

SB: Oh, yes.

DB: I'm sure you know Kenny Baker. But, I built a robot in front of the audience, made out of an old-fashioned type robot with square head, square body, square arms, square legs. Taking it out of an orange type crate box and constructing it in front of the audience and then this robot would start walking and then the sort of mind reading act that I would do – he would be able to do – somebody chose a word from a newspaper – he had a little thing that came out of his chest like a printing machine where pieces of paper would come out and the work was printed on there and I would put some coloured balls in a bag which somebody in the audience held when they were mixing them, coloured lights flashed on his chest and when they got hold of one of the balls – say a red light would light up on his chest and he took the ball up it was red!

SB: Oh!

DB: He'd put it back and next time it would be a green or a yellow ball. Now, a lot of that was actually genuinely done mechanically and electronically but the audience didn't know that at one time the robot went back into this little hut which at one point I made it look like a rocket and at other time it was just like another ...like a telephone box and the one that came out was Kenny Baker in an outfit that was identical to that because Kenny could do an awful lot of things that the mechanical robot couldn't do. For

instance, he played the harmonica very well – that was part of his act and therefore he could play any tune that they'd call out. I actually had a small scooter made, that he could ride because he actually drove a car, an adapted car. He had a Rolls Royce at one time [SB: laughs]. But, we had an adapted scooter – very modern looking – and I was in an open car behind him with a box with a big aerial as if I was controlling the scooter action. It was actually him driving it so he put his hand out when he wanted to turn right and he'd stop at the lights. People thought I was controlling the robot and the only thing was that he wasn't allowed to be seen so we had a special case which apparently was a robot which was Kenny being carried into the theatre and the robot that I'd constructed was in pieces in other boxes so even the staff backstage – the crew – didn't ever see Kenny alive and he didn't like that because he was a performer and he didn't want to be anonymous so he, after a while... it didn't work out. One day, many years later because we stayed friends, he phoned me up and said, " David, I've been asked to do something on a film. You've got a lot of experience with film, I've never done a film. Would you help me with the contract?" so he came here to this very table where we're sitting now, looked through it and I said, " It looks alright to me. I don't understand that much about it, let's go and see the producer and we went to Elstree which is only about ten minutes from here and spoke to an unknown man called George Lucas [Both laugh] and he [Kenny] signed the contract, under my guidance and he became R2D2 "

SB: Mmm.

DB: And, of course, the rest is history. But he, even when he wasn't on the film any more but because they used R2D2 mechanically.... He was still being paid for being on the set and not doing anything and now he still goes around to international conferences and signs autographs and things like that. He's an incredible character but he was always.... You know, if it was Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs in pantomime or.... Summer seasons...he'd be Dopey, the little one. He was the smallest midget in show business and he could ice skate and played the harmonica very well and he played other instruments and how we first met.... Is this of interest to you"

SB: Yes. Absolutely!

DB: How we first met was in 1952, I worked at a nightclub in London called Churchill's.

SB: Right.

DB: And one of the other acts on was .... on the harmonica.... was Kenny Baker and he thought he'd put some comedy in so he is announced and he comes on.... There's a bar stool and he struggles.... As if he couldn't get onto the bar stool and it really looked pathetic and difficult and eventually he sits on it and plays his harmonica. He plays very well and he had a showgirl, a tall.... very tall..... the tallest one he could find to help him on and off but... it didn't mean a thing, you know, these were very heavy business men, heavy drinkers, business men, the men who came to see the hostesses and then told him they didn't come to see the Speciality Acts and it didn't work so I asked him – that was the first time I'd met him – I said, " Kenny, would you like me to help you with a different act ?" He said, " Yes, that would be very nice". I said, " OK". So, this is what

happened: The next night there was an off-stage announcement 'Ladies and Gentleman, would you please welcome the virtuoso of the harmonica, Mr. Kenneth Baker and there was a black out and suddenly it was a spotlight of a man, apparently standing playing the harmonica and he played something like Sabre Dance, you know, a really, really fast number. Very good and the lights come on and people would applaud and they'd see it was a midget standing on a barstool. Because with the lights off you could just see his head.

SB: Mmm.

DB: His fingers are a little small but when he's playing he holds them towards you so nobody knew it was actually a midget - Little people as we call them now.

SB: Yes.

DB: So when the lights come on it was a fantastic surprise and he did much better. Before that, when he tried to do the comedy bit, he came on with a big violin case and he opens it up and takes a harmonica out of that and this tall showgirl has to lift him on and then the people.... He got sympathy rather than the applause.

SB: Mmm.

DB: So it worked, so we became friends and we've still stayed friends to this day.

SB: So that was a long association with Kenny?

DB: Absolutely. Yes, I'm still in touch with Kenny. But there are numerous acts I ... that were unusual acts that were surprising, you know, acts that you wouldn't expect to see in a Variety bill.

SB: Mmmm. So you....

DB: Like a man who didn't have any arms and he would shoot a gun and that was his act. He would come on and he'd get a volunteer and shave that person and shaved him with a cutthroat razor with his feet! He painted with his feet, he could load a small bullet into a rifle and shoot the rifle and after a few minutes of watching him, you forgot that he didn't have arms because his legs looked sort of natural and his feet looked like hands.

SB: Really?

DB: That was another Variety act that stands out and there was a man called Ron Dart.

SB: Oh, yes.

DB: .....who used to put darts in his mouth and blow them more accurately into the board than most people could do when they through the darts.

SB: Did you get to .....when you were touring did you spend a lot of time with people. I mean, did you tend to do a show with a group of people and move round or...?

DB: Only because it happens that way if you worked with a certain agency, like, I was with Lew and Leslie Grade, for about seventeen years – Of course, they would book their own acts so very often when you appeared somewhere you found that you were on a bill with people you'd already met and in particular I became extremely friendly with Dickie Valentine, who was the first pop idol in this country. We did our radio broadcasts together, then we toured – not necessarily every week – but we'd keep coming up – When he was Top of the Bill, I was second – you'll see some of those posters there and we became so friendly that we went on holidays together when he brought his first wife to my parent's home and we stayed there. It was a bit of a scandal in those days. She was an Ice Skater and then I was called into the office one day, by The Grade Organisation. Leslie Grade saying, "You're very friendly with Dickie, aren't you?" I said, "Yes". He said, "Well, he wants to get married and it's going to destroy his pop image could you break it up please and if you do we'll give you the Palladium and I went absolutely white and walked out and as it happened when Dickie did marry his first wife, Betty, his fans didn't desert him at all. I've got photos of hundreds of people crowding round wishing them well. You know, it .... But you can understand that the agent thought that he might lose his popularity, which he didn't. I've got one particular photo at the Belfast, Opera House, taken from the roof and all these see of thousands of girls milling around, two or three ambulances, couple of Police on horseback [SB: laughs] trying to.... You know, taking out girls who were fainting and so on but that was all for Dickie and because I was quite young at the time and not too bad looking – you're seeing me now, a little bit older – but in those days I got the fall-out of the fans because both Dickie and I would stand at the stage door for a long time signing autographs teasing each other very often with different things so we toured, as I said, quite a lot in Variety and became firm friends and unfortunately in 1971 he was killed in a car crash.

SB: Mm.

DB: He was .... He had been appearing in a nightclub in Wales and he had a drummer and a pianist with him and they went over a hump-backed bridge and crashed ....and the car burst into flames and...was eventually killed.... I went to the funeral and because he used to sing with the Ted Heath band, all the brass section turned up and played. I It was absolutely emotional and crying...

SB: Oh, yes.

DB: Incredible funeral. And the other funeral where that happened, I remember very well, was my dear friend, Alma Cogan because she died quite young.

SB: Mmm.

DB: And I've never seen so many men crying at a funeral – it was very emotional because she was very much loved.

SB: Really?..... And did you when you were on tour.... How did you travel? By train? Or car?

DB: Yes, I remember when I first started I travelled by train as most people did and very often many of us would meet at Crew station which was a central point where you had to change and it became like a mini convention of Variety artists, late at night, but in the early fifties I got myself a scooter, one of these very beautiful black and silver Lambrettas.

SB: Ohhh.

DB: Which was all the rage and I put all the different horns and lights on it and special seat covers and because of that I was asked to join a scooter club which became the biggest scooter club of Great Britain and they made me the President because I had a high profile from television and I stayed President for about fifteen years! And I did blindfold obstacle courses in Manchester's Belleview and other venues throughout the countryside you know blindfold drives and so on but it got a lot of publicity, which was good for the scooter industry.

SB: Mmm.

DB: And that was my mode of travel. First of all, it was London, going from one night club to the next but you didn't have much time and I didn't have a lot of props so I would literally park it outside the night club come out jump onto the scooter and drive to the next venue which you couldn't have done in a car and playing Variety I used to go to the station and it would be put onto the goods wagon. I'd sit comfortably in the train. When I got off [I'd] go to the theatre and then I could have the pick of the best digs because everybody else wanted to be within walking distance and I had my scooter so I could pick the nicest digs I could find and drive there on the scooter.

SB: And talking about digs.... Do you have any memories of any particular digs, at all?

DB: I certainly do, like all Variety artists. I'll tell you one particular story. I can't remember which town it was in but it was one of the seaside towns and they had given me an attic

room and I remember I thinking that the sheets were damp, you know, everything was damp and unpleasant and the next day I woke up and my back just wouldn't work I was doubled over, I was in real pain but the show must go on. Incidentally, in my just under 50 years, just over forty-nine years I worked non-stop and never ever missed a show through illness. I often did shows with high temperatures or feeling really bad but I did the shows. This particular time, I get out of bed and I'm doubled over and I remember walking doubled over like that to the show but I forgot to tell the people who set my props that I was doubled over, so they set the microphone really high [SB: laughs]. Now, as a magician I actually palm some cigarettes in one hand and I had one of these evening capes tied to my hand to do another trick so I couldn't physically adjust the microphone so when I walked on I was all doubled up with my hands full talking into a microphone that was about two feet above my head!

SB: Oh, no!

DB: Yes, it was only in the second show that I got the stagehands to put it down but that's the sort of thing that happened. Some of the digs were absolutely horrific and some of them were wonderful.

SB: Mmm.

DB: And the ones where a number of other artists stayed were always fun because after we had something to eat we could talk and we could relax and I was very lucky because in 1954/1955 at the height of my radio programmes I used to get all these cards which I'd asked for, to tell me what the listeners had done, to be sent and the BBC would take a census and just put the numbers down but they wouldn't check them individually and I had to actually go through them and I mentioned... sometimes three to four thousand cards in a week... so I had my fellow artists would sit round the dining table sorting ...

SB: Oh!

DB: You know, when I'd asked people to choose from say a diary or a teaspoon, a pencil or a cup - a little object in front of them - we had to sort out the categories so my friends would take handfuls of these cards and sort them and the next day I'd phone the BBC and tell them the percentage that we'd got, which were mostly the percentages I'd predicted and they went back to the BBC.

SB: Oh.... So the listeners used to write down one object, did they?

DB: Yes.

SB: and then .....

DB: For instance, I did different experiments like this every week but the one I'm talking about, I would ask people to put four objects in front of them like.... Take a teaspoon, a small diary or little book, a teacup upside down and a pencil .... Turn your back to the table and when I count to three turn around and pick up one of those and then I had maybe a dozen people in two studios doing the same thing and then the Compere.... in those days were people like Alfred Marks, Cyril Fletcher, David .... They would say what was happening in the studio and I would say in my studio,.... And the listener's would send in cards, which I asked them to do, that was addressed to either David Berglas, BBC London or sometimes just David Berglas, London from all over the world they came in, thousands of them and say, "I picked up the match box with my left hand, am I normal?" [SB: laughs] and another one said, "I was holding my baby in my right hand and then I used my left hand and picked up the teaspoon, what do you make of that?" But, because they added that they enjoyed the show, the BBC looked at it as fan mail! So to this day I'm a record at the BBC as the man who had the highest fan mail ever! A little bit of a cheat because I asked them to write in but if they hadn't said that they'd enjoyed the show or enjoyed me or enjoyed what I'm doing it wouldn't have been fan mail!

SB: Oh [laughs].

DB: It would have just been statistics.

SB: Yes.

DB: So, I got in the back door!

SB: So, in the digs you got everybody to help you?

DB: Yes, quite a number of times they spent a few hours helping me sort these things out.

SB: And in the digs, did you get full board? They did meals and.....

DB: Mostly we had an evening meal, not lunch. We had breakfast and then we'd get the evening meal. And I particularly have a liking for a green salad and I make my own salad dressing which is a mixture of lemon juice and sugar or sweeteners later on and a little bit of olive oil and because I could never get a decent salad in these digs, I carried my own salad dressing!

SB: [laughs] Oh did you?

DB: and everybody became addicted to it. I used to have just a small bowl for myself but everybody who tasted it wanted one so in the end we got very large salad bowls and I did the mixing of the dressing and people to this day still meet me and say, "We still use your salad dressing".

SB: Oh really?

DB: Yes. Some digs were very good, quite stodgy but good and well served and clean but others were just the opposite. But as you travelled round you got to know the good and the bad digs.

SB: Yes. And did you write in advance to book them? I mean, was it very far in advance?

DB: Not really. Most of the time you'd arrive and there'd be a list of the digs on the board and the Stage Manager would have put those up and sometimes they would recommend and say, "There's a very nice lady, Mrs. Cleaner, Mrs. Bentley", and others and you'd go along on the day.... A few, which you enjoyed, you'd book ahead and say, "I'm coming along next week, keep my room for me".

SB: Mmm. Did you ever do any seasons at all?

DB: No. This is a very unusual thing. I'm glad you asked me because people never think about this. Every artist that I knew did Pantomime and Summer Seasons and in all my years I did one short summer season, but that was by choice.

SB: Mm.

DB: I was lucky that I got a lot of individual bookings companies and for private parties and so on. That was my mainstay so I never actually went in to do Pantomimes or Summer Seasons. But, in 1966 I was asked to do a Summer Season at The Dome in Brighton and they'd had a really bad time there. They'd just – for years – made losses all the time and they booked an act called Nina and Frederick. She was some sort of titled Lady from Denmark and her husband – very upper crust – very entertaining – made a name for themselves on television and they could only do the second half. They wouldn't do the two halves so they booked Peter Gordeno and his dancers to open the first and second half with a short routine and I did the first half, which was about fifty minutes or something like that. They had an orchestra, then Peter Gordeno's dancers, then me doing fifty minutes. Then the interval then again The Orchestra, Peter Gordeno and then Nina and Frederick and we broke all records as far as I know, to this day and we were packed from the day they opened until they closed. It was only about a six-week season. When I tell you that they were closed on a Monday so as soon as we finished on a Friday[Saturday?], late at night, I had my family with me then. I would drive my family to London, I would drive to the airport, get on a plane, fly to Holland, do a long meeting and discussion with the television company. On the Sunday, record an hour's show and fly back on a Monday and back at The Dome for Tuesday,

Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday and that went on for all those six weeks and whilst I was doing this television series in Holland which – I don't want to sound too conceited – but it really cause a huge sensation and I can show you one of my scrapbooks where I'll say, 'Never mind the quality, feel the width' because it's just huge pages – page after page after page, First show – page after page after page, Second show, page after page... right through from October 1966 to May 1967 and so a publishing company got interested in me and wanted a book, so we wrote the book whilst I was travelling back and forth. One of the newspaper reporters, a man called Noel Botham contacted me and he wrote - my dictation - but he wrote and he is the one that recently, a couple of years ago, wrote the life story of Princess Diana.

SB: Oh right.

DB: I wouldn't have known that but I saw a television talking about Princess Diana. But, everything was happening. The television series in Holland, the Summer Season at The Dome, writing the book – Doing the television show and travelling back and forth and sometimes twice a week. It was very hectic.

SB: Mmm. And so.. you were mentioning your family... when you were on tour, did they ever tour with you? Or, did they come to see you perform?

DB: Very seldom. Very, very seldom. They certainly didn't tour with me although, because I was doing a Summer Season I got my wife and our two boys to come down. My wife, who was actually pregnant with our daughter – she was born in 1967 – and they would come and see me occasionally when it was convenient but never toured with me.

SB: When you were in Brighton, where did you all stay?

DB: In hotels. Yes, in those days we stayed in hotels. Small hotels, but hotels. Yes.

SB: Oh.

DB: I had a dog, before I got married to Ruth. I had a puppy that grew into a bigger dog called Tricky and Tricky, I paid two pounds for in a pet shop. When he was four months old he became a performing dog. I hadn't bought him for that reason, he just did such incredible things and I have a whole scrape book full of cuttings about him.

SB: Really?

DB: Mmm. That I have to say that was very much influenced by an act I mentioned to you earlier called Reg Russell and Susie because Susie was a dog that would bark out numbers, add and subtract and so on and I always thought there was a trick to it and

there really wasn't. This dog just somehow sensed when it should start barking and my dog Tricky did that. But then I combined my magical thinking of mind reading and made the dog could do that. And my dog would bark out a number you were thinking of and my dog and I would have conversations like saying, "How many legs have you got?" and the dog would bark four and I'd say, "How many eyes have you got?" and he would bark two and I'd say, "Now, add them together", and he would bark six. "Deduct your tail!" and he would bark five.

SB: [Laugh].

DB: Then I'd say, "How many biscuits would you like and he'd just "Woof, woof, woof, woof, woof, woof" and I'd say, "How many are you going to get?" and "woof" [Both laugh]. So, I created conversation like that.

SB: Mmm.

DB: I could.... I'd fan the cards out and get him to choose a card, which was the one you were thinking of only you, didn't know that. Sometimes he'd start chewing it and I'd say, "For God's sake don't spit out the pips" [both laugh]. But I could throw a card into the air and he'd catch it, like you can do with a Frisbee.

SB: Yes?

DB: So I could throw cards so they'd come back to me. That's ... lots of Magician's have that skill.... But he'd catch them and if I spread items out and ask you to think of one – soft toys and bits and pieces – you'd think of one, he'd go to the box, rummage round and pick one out... the one you were thinking of! I could do that with three different people and three different objects.

SB: Really?

DB: Yes. He had lots of adventures and as I said, I've got a whole scrapbook of cuttings about him.

SB: Right.

DB: I had him for fifteen years. Then we had one of his sons – identical to him – for eleven years. There was an overlap so people didn't know that Tricky had died. They thought that the other one was still Tricky and it seemed that we had the same dog for over twenty years.

SB: Well, that's amazing.

DB: Yes. It was fantastic and he had some sort of instinct because he'd be very lively, running around back-stage and the minute I started getting ready, I didn't have to shut the dressing room door, he'd settle on my suitcase, sit down there quietly. He had the sense that this was the time that I was getting ready and I could leave the door open, go on.. he'd hear my voice over the tannoy he'd still be lying there he'd jump up as soon as I came in again.

SB: That's fantastic.

DB: Yes. When I was driving my scooter he would sit between my legs and he'd put his paws up on the front. On trains, on planes – I used to fly a lot – He'd come on the plane with me, he'd come on the scooter, the trains. He was an incredible dog.

SB: That's fantastic.

DB: Yes.

SB: I just wanted to ask you.... Where did you meet your wife?

DB: It was about 1953 or 4. I was entertaining at a magic convention at The Cumberland Hotel in London – not a convention, a dinner – and I'd heard that there was a young magician there, an amateur magician who wanted to meet me. I'd heard his name a few times and apparently he was at this dinner. So, when I'd finished working, after the show he came over and introduced himself and told me his name and said he'd wanted to meet me for a while and started talking to me but I wasn't looking at him because next to him was a very beautiful girl that I couldn't take my eyes off! And so, on the spur of the moment I said, "It so happens that I'm having a party on Thursday night. Would you like to come along?" Looking at this girl [SB: laughs]. And he said, "That'd be fine". Well, I had a girl working for me at the time that Ted Ray had introduced me to. She was an ice skater and also a friend of Dickie Valentine's girlfriend that he'd married and she became my assistant secretary. Not so much an assistant on stage. She actually never helped me on stage but she would prepare things and do some of my administration and so I told this guy, "I'm sorry but the party's off but we can still go out as a foursome and we went out and there was some sort of attraction between Ruth and myself straight away. And then I went over to Germany to work for a while and she didn't see me for about a year. And she said she lost quite a bit of weight! And then I can back. She said she used to listen to me on the radio before she'd even met me. And when I came back I said to her, "Well, you know it's not a question of if we're going to get married, but when". So, of course there was a bit of a whoha but we got married.

SB: Oh, wonderful.

DB: And the wedding was interesting because at the Registry Office, Ruth's parents were divorced and hadn't seen each other for years and I said, "I insist that your parents

have to be there" and they'd never met my parents. And my sister and her husband came, who had only just got married themselves and my best man was Tricky my dog

SB: Ah.

DB: And that's all there was. Her parents who had never seen each other for years and had never met my parents and never met my sister and her husband and they came to this Registry Office and then when the Registrar said, " And where's the ring", my little dog got up on his hind legs and round his neck he had a ribbon with a ring on it and in a magical way I pulled it off and gave Ruth the ring and the night before I used to go – I knew all the night workers, taxi drivers, newspaper sellers and so on and I went to my usual newspaper stand where they'd be selling the newspaper's for the next day, late at night and I said to the paper seller who had known me for years, and I knew his father and his father before – his grandfather – "I bet you can't guess what I'm doing tomorrow?" He said, "You're not getting married, are you?" I said, "How do you know?" He said, " You've got that look about you" and at about three o'clock in the morning – Well, what I didn't know was that he had informed the newspapers, but I didn't know that, He himself turned up at the Registry Office with a little box camera, and suddenly there were all the newspaper people there so we have some nice photos which we wouldn't have had if he hadn't done that.

SB: Oh. That's lovely. Well, I think that – I don't know if you've got anything else to add, you've got so many stories, I think I might have to come back again – but, it's been really nice to talk to you.

DB: Well, thank you. You're very welcome to come back.