

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Duggie Chapman – interview transcript

Interviewer: Sue Barbour

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SB: This is Sue Barbour from the University of Sheffield interviewing Duggie Chapman. First of all Duggie, I'd like to ask if you are in agreement with me using this interview for the British Library Theatre Project and to inform future generations about Variety Theatre.

DC: Yes, of course I am. It's fine.

SB: OK. Well, first of all, whereabouts were you born and brought up?

DC: I was born in Burnley in Lancashire and went to school in Burnley.

SB: And how did you come to be involved with Show Business?

DC: Well, when I was 13 [years] I was in a 'play' group at school called The Rose Theatre Club. We used to do Shakespeare and we did shows about three times a year and there was a Producer for Robert Donat who was doing a film in the Lancashire area called 'The Cure for Love' and he was looking for some little boys to appear in the show locally, so he went round all the schools where they had drama groups, really, and we auditioned... about 200 in the town from different schools and I got the part in the film 'The Cure for Love'.

SB: Really!

DC: Yes, so I suppose really that's where I started to get the bug.

SB: Mmm.

DC: With that film.

SB: And then what did you.....did you continue with school and then...?

DC: We did the film with Robert Donat and – it was also the first film for Dora Bryan and Thora Hird was in it.

SB: Wow!

DC: Yes, 19.....let me get the date right.....1949.

SB: 1949.

DC: 1949, yes and I was also in a Concert Party on a Saturday morning – for kids at the Odeon Cinema Club. Before the film they used to have a half hour show and I put that together for them and we used to go and rehearse in the dressing room in the week at the Odeon Cinema in Burnley and then put these little shows on, on a Saturday. And when Carol Levis came to the Victoria Theatre in Burnley for a show - I was fifteen – I auditioned and I went away the following week – because I'd just left school and taken a job - and I went away with Carol Levis. It was Barry Took then who was compeering the show...

SB: Oh!

DC: ...and later it was Violet Pretty who of course became Ann Heywood and I stayed with that show as a boy singer for six or eight months.

SB: Gosh! And did that tour all over England?

DC: It did, weekly Variety Bills and we were the newcomers in the first half.

SB: Oh, and then they used to have the Variety after it?

DC: Yes.

SB: Oh gosh, that's interesting.

DC: Yes, it was good fun. And then I joined a boy group called Dudley Dale and his Gang which was six boys and Dudley Dale. He was a Liverpool Comedian who put this group together. It was well established when I went with them. A lot of people went through Dudley Dale. And I stayed with him until my voice broke – about sixteen and a half, [or] seventeen and then I went in my very first revue with Alan Modley. A show called Piccadilly to Paris and I was the Feed at seventeen to Alan Modley and eventually started to do comedy myself and became a solo Comic when I was 19 [years], 20 [years]

which was a bit young really but I went from revue to revue and I worked on the latter days of – when, of course, commercial television started and the theatres started to get a little bit iffy and dodgy at least I'd been to those, what were major theatres and played them on the latter days of Variety. So that's really my very first start.

SB: Yes. During those years did you all travel together, the company or I mean how did you get from town to town?

DC: With Carol Levis we were taken in cars.

SB: Oh, right.

DC: With the Dudley Dale people, we went on the train.

SB: Did you?

DC: Yes.

SB: OK, so did you..... that was at the time when all the shows tended to.... the artists used to travel by train?

DC: That's right and on a Sunday. I mean, I remember with the revues we travelled by train on a Saturday night when the show was finished there'd be someone from the local railway station to pick up the scenery, take it down to the station, it went on the train the next day in a carriage behind the compartments that we were all in and it actually travelled with us.

SB: Oh, it did? The whole set and everything?

DC: Free of charge because if there was more than eighteen in the company, you could get the scenery carriage free of charge.

SB: Oh, so that's how it worked.

DC: That's how it worked and it's quite amazing really because you could go say from Carlisle to Reading, on a Sunday with a couple of changes, with this behind you and I mean you couldn't even get there in a day today.

SB: No absolutely.

DC: ... and this was sixty years ago.

SB: Gosh. And did you ever meet You know, I've heard stories about Crew and places like that..... did you meet any other members of other shows?

DC: Oh we did, yes. There were lots of people there and I remember seeing people who were Stars of the day at Crewe station.

SB: Mmm.

DC: And talking to other companies.

SB: And was it kind of exciting? You were young weren't you?

DC: It was for me, yes.

SB: And so when you finished the revues – I mean when did you first get into producing shows?

DC: Oh, that was much later. I, when I started doing my comedy act, I did a week at a theatre they called the Collins Music Hall in Islington in London which is now defunct, of course. But it was a showcase theatre where all the agents used to go on a Monday and stand in the bar at the back and go out to see the different acts. And I was working for Don Ross then, who as you know was married to Gertie Gitana. He was a very nice guy, a nice agent and he took me to Collins for my first week and a representative from the BBC Variety side was there and invited me to go down, during that week, to do an audition for a guy called Alistair Scott-Johnson who was the light entertainment producer and I got my first radio date two weeks later in a show called Variety Playhouse which was a Variety show introduced by Vic Oliver who also conducted the BBC Concert Orchestra and people like Ronnie Barker were resident in that show doing little sketches each week, you know, with people like...oh....Kenneth Williams....

SB: Oh really!

DC: Doing different sketches every week apart from Variety and from that one broadcast I spent a lot of time on BBC shows with things like Worker's Playtime and Mid-day Music Hall from the Playhouse London, with different producers Trafford Whitelock, Bill Worsley and I think that first year I did about 60 radio shows.

SB: Really and was that....

DC: but was never lucky to get into television but I don't think I pushed that much, I don't know why I didn't but I did like doing the radio shows.

SB: Mmmm. And what did you do? Comedy?

DC: Comedy with a song finish.

SB: And how did you.... Did you work out your own material or...?

DC: Yes. And in those days you had to send the scripts in advance. They were only six minute spots on those radio shows. It had to be word for word and most people used to stand and work with a script but I used to just use a little postcard or something in my hand rather than a big script, just with cue words, you know....

SB: Mmm.

DC:and managed to get away with it [Both laugh] with that but yes, it was good. But what was amazing... things like Mid-day Music Hall for the half hour programme, they had a full concert orchestra, you know, just playing for the acts. Obviously there'd be a girl or a male singer topping the bill or a comic or whatever, but even if it was just a play on and off, it was the full orchestra.

SB: Amazing.

DC: And I remember the Music Publishers in Denmark Street, Tin Pan Alley – if you were doing a broadcast and you said I want to sing so and so song.... they would give you a full-arrangement for this orchestra on a radio show. It's amazing.

SB: That is amazing, isn't it?

DC: And then we went, of course, from that to organ and drums, didn't we?

SB: Yes. [Both laugh] A bit of a come-down.

DC: It all changed. It all really changed within a year. And then, of course, it became the Cabaret Club syndrome which I really couldn't work with. When I found people walking about when you were on very disturbing....and waiters and waitresses, I just hated that and luckily there were still Summer Shows and Pantomimes so I worked through, more or less continuously.

SB: Did you?

DC: Yes. I was very lucky really. And then when I was in my late 20s I went to Jersey for a Summer Season for a guy called Billy Wells, who was a Female Impersonator and he ran an Old Time Music Hall and he asked me if I'd be the Chairman and I'd never even seen a Chairman in an Old Time Music Hall but I did it and it worked well for me and it was something I enjoyed, something that I liked. And the year after I was doing my Summer Season in Skegness at Butlin's and I was staying at a hotel on the promenade called the Parade Hotel and it had a ballroom with a little stage.... It was very similar only smaller to the theatre I had just been working in, on Jersey and I said to the hotel boss, 'You know I've just done a show in Jersey, with a Music Hall and it did good business and I think it would work in here. So we built a little stage and the next year I went and started 'Chapman's Music Hall' at the Parade Hotel.

S: Oh.

DC: That was in '63 and I stayed there for five years, at the Parade Hotel with the show – packed out every night! 200 seater – and the next year I went to the Arcadia Theatre, then The Embassy, then the Derbyshire Miner's Holiday Park. I started when they transformed the old Embassy Ballroom into the Embassy Theatre and I went in there with a show and I did..... I think it was 35 years presenting in Skegness.

SB: Gosh!

DC: Which was a bit of a record.

SB: It must have been!

DC: I still do my shows there but the actual Summer Season shows there in one theatre or another. I suppose I should have lived in Skegness really but.... that's what I did, yes. In 1969 I got the opportunity to put my own pantomime in at Barnsley, with the Management there and I stayed at Barnsley for eight years producing the pantomime and at that time the Lyceum Theatre and the Empire in Sheffield had closed and it was before they built the Crucible so our pantomime business all came from around the Sheffield area and I remember running ten weeks - in 1972 with Charlie Williams at the Civic, Barnsley for...yes, ten weeks fantastic business.

SB: That is fantastic.

DC: Yes.I did the Moss Empires, then in Summer Season and then in the 1973 Summer Season I think I had nine resort shows, yes.

SB: So it sort of snowballed really?

DC: Theatres that have gone that you've never heard of, which gave young people a chance to perform, which you don't get anymore. I used to start in Skegness and travel to Gorleston, Nr. Yarmouth, then go down to Minehead where I had a theatre. Plymouth, Hoe Theatre. The Cruston?, Newquay where I had . Ilfracombe where I had two.... You'd keep going round and round all summer...

SB: Did you book a lot of young performers?

DC: Yes, they were all young but I still had established performers. I mean, I had people like Derek Roy, who had been a very big radio and TV Star, at Ilfracombe. I had actually worked in Summer Season, before I had my own shows, I actually worked for Issy Bonn who became a producer.

SB: Oh, did you?

DC: I did two years for Issy Bonn at Ilfracombe, as a Comic and three years at Newquay and when he retired I took over those venues and that's how I...it started me as a producer really.

SB: Yes. And did you intend to do it or did it just happen?

DC: I stopped performing except I used to do Barnsley every Christmas. I played Dame in Panto.

SB: And did you miss performing or...?

DC: Not really. Not really. I missed Pantomime, that's why I decided to do Dame.... I don't miss it now because of the travelling and the hustle but you know in those days it was much easier to get around.

SB: Yes. Yes, it was and so... if I can go back again to when you were on tour, I'd like to know really about the digs, the accommodation and things.

DC: Ah, terrible digs! When I was a young boy, I mean, with Dudley Dale, we would sleep three in a bed in some places – the lads.

SB: Really?

DC: Yes. And he would get the food in for the landlady to do the cooking, you know, Dudley Dale.

SB: Oh, did he?

DC: Yes and he would go to the Butcher's and ask for two pounds of bacon bits, which you know were the cheapest cut off the bacon [Sue laughs]. That would be your breakfast in the morning! [Both laugh]. Everything for nothing but I suppose at 15 or 16 it was fun.

SB: And did he manage the group.... He paid for everything?

DC: That's right. £4 we got. £4 and our keep.

SB: And did you find it went a long way?

DC: Well, it did. I used to send a £1 home to my mother and I still had money. I think I opened a post office book. I did with Carol Levis – opened a post office book – and I got more money with them but still only £7 or £8 but when you think the dancers in the show were only getting £3.50 you know £3 10s.

SB: Yes.

DC: and managed to pay, I don't know.... and when you look back now - you can pay that for a sandwich - you can't believe that The landladies.... full board was about £3.10s and £4, it was very good at £4 and you're talking about three meals a day.

SB: Yes.

DC: So how things have changed, it's just crazy.

SB: Yes. Yes it certainly has. And did you always have a base – a permanent home? Or did you just stay in the digs wherever you were?

DC: I lived in Burnley when I wasn't working – at home.

SB: You did?

DC: Yes.

SB: So you went home if you had a week out?

DC: Yes.

SB: But it was with your family? So you didn't have two lots of

DC: I had a flat in – from 1959, I lived just outside London in Petersham, nr. Richmond, with some friends that I'd met and I would go there sometimes to be in the London area.

SB: Yes. And did you have an agent at all? A specific agent or....?

DC: Well, I started off with Don Ross and then I went with a guy who died just a couple of years ago, called Vincent Shaw.

SB: Oh Vincent Shaw, yes.

DC: ..and he was my agent and looked after me and even when I started to run my own productions I worked from his office in Welbeck Street and lived at Vincent's house in Wimpole Street, would you believe?

SB: Ooh!

DC: I had a room there, when I was in town. When I took my shows on tour, he managed...he did the bookings for all those tours.

SB: Oh, right.

DC: And the Music Hall shows, of course, we used to play full weeks. When we do it today, which is at very odd times now, it's one night or one show.

SB: Mmm.

DC: But we did terrific business with the Music Hall.

SB: Yes.

DC: And that was when everybody said Variety was finished. And they've been saying it since 1956! And it still goes on and although I'm still involved now with it, it is a cottage industry but it still happens and there are still plenty of Variety performers around.

SB: Mmm.

DC: I can find them and it still happens really in holiday parks now, which is the only place for young people to learn our side of the business.

SB: Yes.

DC: Although it's more or less – I suppose.....musical theatre based now but they still have visiting Comics and Singers and Musical Acts so it's still going but just a different area now.

SB: Mmm. And you think people still want to see.... Well, they want to be entertained, don't they?

DC: They certainly do. I've just had a show out the last 12 days, which I called Christmas Music Hall and we've been getting 300/350 people and there's been... well not even names pulling them in, in the last few weeks... so it's obvious that people want that light Variety.

SB: Yes.

DC: Entertainment. I think they're sick of seeing just one person all night, you know, like Jimmy Carr and Alan Carr, as good as they probably are, to perform for two hours, you know...

SB: Mmm.

DC: Young people like it because it's all they know. They've been brain washed as saying that's a show but it isn't. Without four or five people, it's not a show.

SB: No.

DC: Not in my opinion anyway.

SB: No, that's right and when did you come to be in Blackpool? To be based in Blackpool?

DC: I came here in 1973 because I was doing quite a bit of work round here. The Central Pier and I ran St. Annes Theatre. I ran Rep. in the summer at St. Annes Theatre

and unfortunately the second year we were there – I had a play with Ken Platt for the summer – and the theatre burned down over night with an electrical fault and we just lost everything so that was one season that went defunct.

SB: Mmm.

DC: And they never replaced the theatre there, which was a shame.

SB: Oh, haven't they?

DC: No.

SB: Oh. So I'm just trying to think if there is anything else....Is there anything else you would like to add? I think I've asked you most of the questions.

DC: I think it will always be there. I don't think acts have the fun today that they used to because they don't.... you're not with people long enough.

SB: No.

DC: You know. Before we were a family - touring - really.... Especially in those early days with revues... everybody helped everybody and it was a family thing.

SB: Oh, I know what I was going to ask you. When you were in the revues, if there was more than one Comic was there any problem with doing the same stuff or did you check with each other?

DC: Well, it was all set at rehearsals and I was always second Comic in the revues but the Comics were much older than me.... Well, I thought they were old – they were probably only 45 or 50 [Both laugh]. You know, I'm their Grandad now really but when you were 20 you thought they were old men.

SB: Yes.

DC: And they always got the chorus girls as well! We never did and we thought, 'This is strange why is she going with an old man' But they did [Both laugh]. But you were told what to do and daren't step out of place.

SB: Yes.

DC: And we were really warm-up Comics for those older Comics.

SB: Yes and presumably in those shows there were Speciality Acts and Dancers, were there?

DC: Oh, terrific Speciality Acts and always eight Dancers. Always two or three Speciality Acts, Musical Acts, Adagio Acts. Especially the revues always had a Parisian-style Adagio Act.

SB: Oh, yes.

DC: With all those titles.

SB: And did they have.....with the band.....

DC: A travelling Musical Director? We had a travelling Musical Director and used the Pit Band every week. Yes.

SB: Oh right and used to have a Band Call?

DC: Yes, used to have a Band Call every Monday morning. Yes.

SB: Oh right.

DC: And some funny bands as well! [Both laugh]. It was good fun.

SB: Was it the same Musical Director...went on the tour, then?

DC: Yes.

SB: So they knew...?

DC: Just on the stick really, yes.

SB: OK.

DC: So we did that every Monday and just went through topping and tailing the music on a Band Call.

SB: And what happened..... were you ever in any shows where, if it wasn't doing good business, they asked you to cut your salary or anything?

DC: No. I was on so little, I don't think they would have asked that.

SB: No.

DC: But I remember being.... They made me Company Manager for one show and it was the time of the Suez crisis and petrol was scarce and it was the petrol coupon time.

SB: Oh yes.

DC: And the Comic said to me, 'When we stop with the coach to get the petrol' He said, 'Get the petrol in and then when they ask for the coupons say, 'I don't handle the coupons, they come from your office in London' He said, 'They'll fall for that, which they did. So I said, 'They're coming to you from our office'. It was too late then, we'd already got the petrol. 'Well, you're not supposed to do this'. And we kept the coupons and we used to sell them for half a crown each [Both laugh]. So that made the wages up during the Suez crisis! [Both laugh]. Selling illegal petrol coupons for half a crown. I remember doing that.

SB: Oh really?

DC: Yes. It was alright.

SB: Anyway, I think I've learned quite a bit from listening to you about those days. So, thank you very much, Duggie.

DC: It's a pleasure, Sue, and thank you very much.

SB: Thanks.