

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

<http://sounds.bl.uk>

Jack Kodell – interview transcript

Interviewer: Sue Barbour

13 February 2009

Magician. Agents; audiences; Chaz Chase; digs; Grand Order of Water Rats; Sid and Max Harrison; Leslie MacDonnell; magic on ice; Mary Naylor; props; Marvyn Roy (Mr Electric); touring

Read other interviews by and about [variety performers](#) and their way of life here.

SB: This is Sue Barbour from the British Library Theatre Project and the University of Sheffield. I am speaking to Jack Kodell. And first of all, Jack, I just wanted to ask you if you are in agreement with us using this recording for the British Library Theatre Project and also for future generations to learn about Variety Theatre.

JK: Yes, I am. I'd be delighted.

SB: OK. The first thing I wanted to ask you is that.... you were born in America.... where were you born?

JK: Mancato, Minnesota.

SB: Oh right.

JK: I've lived in some smaller towns too!

SB: [Laugh]. So, you became a magician at what age? Can you remember?

JK: Well, I became interested in it at about thirteen years of age but to become a magician takes a long time. I mean, I don't know if I ever did become one.

SB: Right. And can you tell us a little bit about your act? What it consisted of?

JK: Well, I said I was interested in magic and there were people in the magic shops and they said, "If you want to be successful, do something different". So, I thought, my goodness, what am I going to do. And I had heard of a chap that had some budgerigars that he'd taught to walk up a ladder and across a rope and I asked my parents if I could get one of these birds to see if I could adapt it to something in magic. And, of course, they were very agreeable and I got a bird and away we went.

SB: [Laugh]. And you ended up doing an act with birds?

JK: I was the Bird Boy. The original Bird Boy. The first act had all birds. Doing an act with all birds.

SB: Right. And what were you known as? What was your name on stage?

JK: Kodell. My 'maiden name if you will [Both laugh].

SB: Yes.

JK: Was Koudelka. [spells] K O U D E L K A. Koudelka. But, that was too difficult for people so I shortened it and made it Kodell. And it looked good on a marquee. Yes.

SB: And at what point did you become 'The Great Kodell'?

JK: I don't know if I ever was! [Both laugh].

SB: So, you worked in America and then eventually you came over to the United Kingdom?

JK: Yes.

SB: And I did notice in 'The Stage' archives that you did quite a lot of different dates. Do you remember what the first time you worked in England was? Or where it was?

JK: No, I don't but..... Yes, I do! It was in Newcastle.

SB: Really?

JK: They sent me to Newcastle so that I could get the feel of a stage.

SB: Oh?

JK: Before I went to the Palladium. But, you know, a raked stage and all that business was different. In fact, I used to touch it. [JK laughs] I had a table, it was on castors [SB laughs] and the Stage Hands put it on to the stage for me all right but I went out there and through habit touched this table to move it and it started going past me, into the orchestra pit! [Both laugh].

SB: Oh no! [laugh]. So, you got you're feel.... and Newcastle! I wonder what the audiences... do you remember if any difference in the audiences in Newcastle to London?

JK: No. I think that audiences the world round are all the same. Spain - do a lot of talking and are difficult to work with audiences are all basically the same.

SB: Mmm. Now, I know I heard a story about when you first came to London that you were a bit lonely and then you saw the name of another American performer.

JK: It was my first night. I was out walking around and I ended up in Leicester Square where I came across The Hippodrome and it had a review in it. I think it was The Follies Bergere and there was a man there by the name of Chas Chase whom I had worked with in the United States and I said, "Oh my, I wonder if he'd remember me?" So I went backstage and the dresser came down and she said, "Mr. Chase is on stage now but he'd like you to wait and he'll be off in a minute". So, I went up to his dressing room and there I was met by Mr. Chase as he arrived off the stage and says, " I'll change my clothes and I'll be with you in a minute, Kid". So, we left there where he had a table full of people and booze, and went across the street to the White Bear Inn, where he offered to buy me a drink, which was nice and in return I went to buy him a drink and put my money on the bar and when I'd finished he said, "Come on, Kid, let's go". He says, "Where were you brought up?" I said, "" He said, "Well, first of all, if someone offers to buy you a drink, you don't have to offer them one in return. Secondly, don't bring out a big wad of bills because the guy next to you might not have any and thirdly, when you pay for the drink, pick up the change because the guy next to you might not have any". Oh my, I certainly was in trouble by this time but anyway; he continued to be my guiding angel.

SB: Was he?

JK: Chas Chase had been all round the world. He knew all about everything. I told him one time that I had a chance to go to Sweden. He said, "I'll tell you what you do, you ask for twenty percent of your money in salary and the other eighty percent in rental of costumes, props and music". I said, "Why is that?" He said, "Because you only pay income tax on the twenty percent".

SB: Oh. So, he helped you a lot?

JK: Oh, all over

SB: So after the Palladium, did you go back to America? Or did you stay around?

JK: I came for six weeks and it was two and a half years before I went back.

SB: Oh, it was? [Both laugh] And in that time, where else did you work?

JK: I did all the Moss Empires.

SB: Did you?

JK: And er..... I believe that's all we were doing, the Moss Empires, The Savoy, the nightclubs.

SB: Yes? And how did you travel from place to place?

JK: By train's what we did.

SB: Did you?

JK: Everybody went by train, didn't they, Sue?

SB: I think so. I think a lot of people did.

JK: Yes. I had a car.... Eventually, I had a car and I drove from here to there but the train was the easiest way.

SB: Mmm. And what kind of accommodation did you stay in?

JK: Oh, the British you know have 'digs'! [Both laugh]. So I got into that but first of all I stayed in a hotel in Newcastle and then I saw all the other acts were over someplace, having a good time. I was pretty lonely in this hotel. And they advised me that I'd got to get into the digs. So, I learned about that.

SB: Did you? And do you remember any particular digs?

JK: No.

SB: No?

JK: Not particularly, no.

SB: But all over the country... Did you get a list or how did you know where to stay?

JK: By word of mouth.

SB: Oh right.

JK: One act would tell you, "Oh, we're going there. Come and stay at my place, we'll have a good time".

SB: Oh right. Now, what year did you come over to England?

JK: 1950.

SB: 1950. So,

JK: It was the end of 1950. October. Because I was there just before my twenty third birthday.

SB: Oh, really. Can you tell me a little bit about...? I know you were the first magician to work on ice.

JK: That's correct.

SB: Whereabouts was that?

JK: The Empress Hall, in London. And I heard - they had an ice show at the Boulevard Room, at the Conrad Hilton, in Chicago and I wanted to do that really bad, very badly and I auditioned for this lady, Miss Abbot, who was like God and she couldn't see magic on ice. But she came to London and saw me at this Empress Hall, on ice and she invited me to meet her in the Green Room, where you met the V.I.P.'s and said, "I apologise to you". I said, "Why?" [Laugh]. "Because I didn't hire you in the United States. Now it will cost me twice as much". I said, "No, four times!" [SB: laughs].

SB: So, how did you get into that show, in London?

JK: I don't really remember, Sue, I'll be honest with you. The agent got me a job, I guess.

SB: Yes.

JK: They said, "Can you skate?" I says, "Yes" and away we went.

SB: Right, so you had the advantage that you could actually skate.

JK: Well, I was brought up in Minnesota.

SB: Oh, yeh.

JK: And I learned how to skate out in the open. You know, twenty below zero!

SB: Yeh.

JK: [Laughs] You skated because you were too cold to stand still!

SB: [Laughs] Yes. So, you were in England and after the two and a half years, you went back to the States, did you?

JK: Just for a brief visit because my father had become ill. Going back for six weeks and going back to England again.

SB: Oh, you did?

JK: Things were going very well in England, business-wise and things in the States weren't that great.

SB: So, can you remember other performers? I mean, did any stick out in your mind? Any performers you particularly liked?

JK: Performers?

SB: Yeh, any good acts?

JK: [Laughs].

SB: Or bad acts?

JK: Well, the first ones I met were crazy! Sid and Max Harrison.

SB: Oh yes!

JK: They were absolutely insane and that was in Newcastle. And then after that, I think, just many of the acts. I don't really recall any outstanding. They were different but those two were absolutely crazy.

SB: Were they?

JK: [Laughs]. Yeh.

SB: How did they feel about you...?. being American? I mean, were they...

JK: Oh, they loved it. They wanted any information regarding material.

SB: Oh!

JK: Comedy material that I could remember. And, of course, I remembered all of the great comics in the United States and their lines. And I'd give them some of their lines and they'd try some of them.

SB: So, tell me about... were you in the Magic Circle or any International Magic....?

JK: No. I'll tell you why. When I was very young, I had this idea to produce something different. I was advised to stay clear of the magicians because they'll only steal your material.

SB: Right.

JK: Which I suppose was true but I... anyway, I didn't mix with the magicians very much.

SB: Well, that's probably sensible.

JK: Well, you do that to defend yourself. I used to have props made here, there and everywhere, so that no one could have them made quite like Kodell... and do my act.

SB: Mmm. So, when you had an idea, how did you go about getting the props made?

JK: Well, you'd look for somebody who could make something. In Brussels, there was a tubular furniture manufacturer and he made my table, which was beautiful. With no perpendicular lines because I was doing the Indian Rope Trick and I didn't want anything to interfere with the line of the rope. So, that was the one place that I found that I recall.

SB: Mmm. Now, was he... he'd never made anything for magicians before?

JK: Oh, no. He was a tubular furniture manufacturer.

SB: Right.

JK: So I said to him... I drew a little sketch. "Can you make me something like this?" "Yes". He did. It was gorgeous.

SB: Wow. And you're a member of the Grand Order of Water Rats.

JK: Yes, and very proud too.

SB: Are you? [JK: nods]. How did you become a member of that order?

JK: I'm trying to remember the man's name. I'm so sorry I can't.

SB: You mean, who proposed you.

JK: Who proposed me? I just can't. I'm sorry. That's terrible.

SB: Do you know what year you became a Water Rat?

JK: No.

SB: It was a long time ago, though, wasn't it?

JK: '52, I guess.

SB: Yeh. And did you meet a lot of people through the order? Or did you already know them?"

JK: You do, most of them and that's how you got in because they know you, or knew of you.

SB: Yes.

JK: And they were just a great bunch of people. You had to be good to be a Lady Ratling or a Water Rat.

SB: Right.

JK: That was one of the requisite.

SB: Yes and there weren't many American Water Rats.

JK: No. I think, Bob Hope and I were the only two Americans.

SB: Really. So, that's good isn't it?

JK: I think so.

SB: Yeh. So you came back to America eventually to work, did you? Or did you keep going backwards and forwards while you performed?

JK: Well, I came back to work at the Boulevard Room in the Conrad Hilton, on Ice, then I'd go back to England and I'd come back and work the Empire Room or the Latin Quarter in New York etc. etc.

SB: Did you have any preference to which country you worked in?

JK: Any what?

SB: Did you prefer working in America or England or didn't

JK: No, I liked England. It was very professional and here in the United States things had dropped off.

SB: Right.

JK: And there were very few places to work. Very competitive. Very competitive. And, I enjoyed the United States very much but I think England seemed to be a little easier from the standpoint of obtaining work.

SB: Right. Now, maybe you could tell me where you met your good wife Mary... Naylor?

JK: [Laughs]. Well, somebody said to me, "If you're going to be a success in England, you have to get into the upper echelons and the only way to do that is to go to a ball with this young lady, whom I'll introduce you to". And so we were at a Lunch Club and this Mary Naylor came in and sat on the other side of this proposing friend of ours. So, that Mary, this man and myself and he said, " I think it would be very nice if you took Mr. Kodell to the Lady Ratings Ball. Well, first of all, I didn't like the sound of it, not knowing what it was. And she didn't like the idea of taking some over-sexed American to the ball [Both laugh]. Anyway, it came about that she said, "Alright". So, I hired a Rolls Royce to go and pick this lady up because I was very impressed with where we were going and who she was [laugh]...

SB: So, you hired the Rolls Royce and went to pick her up for the ball?

JK: Yes, and then I went to knock on the door and her father answered and I said, "I'm here to pick up Miss Mary and take her to the ball. He says, "Is that your vehicle?" I said, "Yes". He says, "You may dismiss the vehicle, I'll take you to the ball". Well, she wasn't going to get stuck with some over-sexed American. So we went to the ball, had a wonderful time. 15,00 people there and she knew them all and they all knew her and by the end of the night, they were all friends of mine.

SB: Well, that's lovely.

JK: Yes.

SB: So.... And Mary was working in England.

JK: Oh yes. Very big Star.

SB: Was she?

JK: Yes. Very big.

SB: So, did you ever work on a bill together?

JK: No. I don't think so.

SB: Really?"

JK: Mary! Did we ever work together on a bill?

MN: Yes. Ronnie Hilton.

JK: Ah, yes! Ronnie Hilton came along and he was out on tour and they teamed Ronnie and Mary and myself to go on this tour again. Yes, that's right.

SB: Oh, right. So, you did get to work together at one point?

JK: Yes.

SB: Eventually, when did you get to come back here to live? In America?

JK: Oh, Sue. You ask me some of the dambdest questions [Both laugh].

SB: I mean, most of your career, did you work in England and America?

JK: Yes. Well.... I worked in eighteen countries.

SB: You did?

JK: Yes.

SB: Oh and I believe you worked in Paris? Is that right?

JK: Yes, I doubled at the Moulin Rouge and the Lido! I'd do one show at the Moulin Rouge go across town on the taxi and do a show at the Lido and then come back and do a second show at the Moulin Rouge.

SB: My goodness!

JK: And that was my night finished.

SB: [Laughs] That's hard work, isn't it?

JK: Well, it was, yes.

SB: Yes. Oh, great. And what other countries did you work in?

JK: Oh.... All the Scandinavian countries. Denmark, Paris, Germany, India, Pakistan...

SB: Did you?

JK: Yeh.

SB: And tell me, did you have an agent or a manager or did you, in each country, work for somebody different?

JK: No. I had an agent that was in London. Sir Leslie MacDonnell and then he had me represented in Paris by Helfont Agency.

SB: Oh right. So, Leslie MacDonnell was your agent...

JK: Personal Manager. Not just an agent, my manager.

SB: Your manager.

JK: He was very good.

SB: Was he? And how did you come to meet him?

JK: Well, I guess I got up to the Foster's Office and he was in the Foster's Office.

SB: Oh, was he?

JK: And he decided to leave the Foster's Office and open his own agency and I said, "Would you take me with you?"

And he said, "Yes". And he had Vera Lynn, Peter Brough and myself. The three of us.

SB: Oh, I didn't know that. That was a good three to have, wasn't it?

JK: Very. He was a nice man. I was like his son.

SB: Oh, lovely. I'm trying to think of what else I wanted to ask you. Did you eventually... well, you retired and I wanted to ask you a little bit about you being a consultant or advising other magicians. I know that you've helped some of the magicians in Las Vegas.

JK: Well, Marvyn Roy, who was Mr. Electric. I helped him a lot. He was like my brother. That's the only one that I really took an interest in, because he did something different, you see.

SB: Yes.

JK: With electric light bulbs.

SB: Yes.

JK: And the other magicians, they didn't have anything different that interested me, you know.

SB: Yes. So how did you meet him? Did you work with him?

JK: Well, Sue, I don't just recall, I'm sorry.

SB: He had an amazing act. A wonderful act.

JK: Yes, he was. Someplace in Chicago, I met him and I was at the Boulevard Room and I said, "Marvyn, can you skate?" and he said, "No". And I said, "Well, I've got a year's contract and I've been here three months. So you've got nine months left... [SB: laughs].... to learn how to skate. Go on the ice arena and learn. He did and he got the job.

SB: Oh, so he took over from you?

JK: He was the second magician on ice and then we got Ron Irvin the job. He was the third.

SB: And what did he do?

JK: I don't recall.

SB: Anyway, thanks for talking to me, I've really enjoyed it.

JK: It's been my pleasure, Sue.

SB: It's been very enjoyable. Thank you.

JK: Thank you.

Read other interviews by and about [variety performers](#) and their way of life here.