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## Marion Konyot – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Sue Barbour**

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Variety performer. American variety; Hal Monty; Will Hammer; Robert Konyot; Pardon Our French (Hellzapoppin'); Terry's Juveniles; theatre education; Lawrence Wright; Florenz Zeigfeld.

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SB: This is Sue Barbour from the University of Sheffield. I'm going to be talking to Marion Konyot who, with her husband, did a wonderful act in Variety. First of all, Marion, I'd just want to ask you if you agree to this interview being put up on the British Library Theatre Project website and also to be used so that future generations can learn a little bit more about Variety Theatre?

MK: Yes, of course.

SB: OK. First of all I wanted to ask you how you got into show business and whether any of your family were in show business before?

MK: Well, my mother had been in a chorus line, here in England, before the first World War and I can't remember the name of the act. It wasn't the Tiller's, I know, but anyway, they emigrated to America and when I was born, naturally, she had me go to dancing school.

SB: Oh, yes? So, where were you born?

MK: In Seattle.

SB: Oh, really?

MK: Yes.

SB: Oh, gosh! So, you went to dance school and that was still in America, was it?

MK: Oh, yes. In Seattle.

SB: Oh, yes.

MK: So then, my mother decided that I wasn't getting enough training. So, somebody said, "Oh, no. The best schools are in New York. So, we traipsed all the way to New York, always on a bus, a Greyhound bus, from one side to the other. [Laughs]. And, she enrolled me with a marvellous school called Ned Wayburn and he used to have all the girls in the Ziegfeld shows.

SB: Oh, really?

MK: And Mr. Ziegfeld came one day and sat me on his knee and said, "Well, when you're a big girl, you'll be one of my Ziegfeld girls!"

SB: Oh, gosh!

MK: But, of course, that wasn't to be. [Both laugh].

SB: Well, that's quite an amazing tale, in itself! So, what did you do after that? You finished training?

MK: Well, I was too young.... in New York they were very hot on age limits... so somebody said, "Oh, well, you have to go to California; you can work there. [Laughs] So, back we went to the other side again and I went to a theatrical school and a lot of famous people were there.... Donald O'Connor, Mickey Rooney, Judy Garland....but, of course, they were just registered there because most of the time they had their schooling at the Studio. So, then, I did a lot of shows. There was still a bit of Vaudeville then and I was playing the accordion and then doing an acrobatic dance. And, then the theatres started closing. So, my mother was friendly with the mother of a boy who was in 'Goodbye Mr. Chips' He played the little boy, all through the film.

SB: Oh really?

MK: Mmm. They were from England and she said, "Oh, you'll have to take her to England because there's plenty of theatres in England. Variety is still going strong!" and then she said, "My husband works on a bus... and he'll set you up and everything". So.... I don't know why we came to England because next year the War started!

SB: Oh, no! [Both laugh].

MK: So, anyhow....I had a lot of publicity from the boat.... Because I used to do a lot of shows on the boat, when we were going back and forth and this guy – his name was Albert Sutan – and he got in touch and he was very interested and he told the newspaper, “I’m going to make her a Star!” and all the rests of it, you know. So, the first thing he did was... he got me on television, from the Alexander Palace.

SB: Oh, yes.

MK: I can’t remember the name of the show, ‘Picture Parade’ or something like that, and Leslie Howard was on it and big Stars. So, I did my act there and then he got me a week’s work in a theatre – Cine-Variety in the Old Kent Road and then he found out that I should have a license!

SB: Oh, no!

MK: So, he said, “ I can’t deal with things like that”, so my mother got back onto this bus driver and he said, “Well, get her into Terry’s Juveniles because they get the license for all the juvenile kids. So, that’s what I did. Oh, and by the way, Albert Sutan later became a big Star called Hal Monty.

SB: Oh, was it Hal Monty? Gosh!

MK: So, I went in Terry’s until I was fourteen. And then I could work without a license.

SB: So gosh. So, you left Terry’s Juveniles, did you? And what did you do, go solo?

MK: Oh, yes. My mother put an ad [advert] in The Stage [Trade newspaper] and..... now, what was his name?..... Somebody called ‘Hinge’[Terry?] got in touch, who had a revue, you know, so I went in that. They had a stilt-walking act in that.

SB: Oh, did they?

MK: The.... Ted somebody.

SB: Was it....not Longtons or....I can’t remember?

MK: No, no. So, anyway I was in that show for a while and then, theatres closed, because of the war, you know and so.... No, before that, when I was still in Terry’s, I did twenty weeks on the North Pier, Blackpool ‘On with the Show’ with Tessie O’Shea. SB: Oh did you?

MK: It was a wonderful show. And unfortunately, the pier burned down and I lost my accordion and everything! [Laughs].

SB: Oh, no.

MK: All my costumes!

SB: In those days, did you provide your own costumes, in shows?

MK: Well, no because I was in Terry's Juveniles.

SB: Oh, so they provided the costumes.

MK: And, of course, in the scenes we were in, they provided those, but, of course, we lost everything. So, we moved to the front of the pier – there was a little theatre there – and we finished the summer season in there. So, after that, I must have been able to leave Terry's. So, my mother took me up to see Lawrence Wright to see if he'd use me again so he said, "Well, no, but I've got a friend here – I can't think of his name - he has a Hawaiian band - Felix Mendelssohn...."

SB: Oh, yes.

MK: So Lawrence Wright said, "Oh, she plays the accordion and everything", because this guy didn't know me, so he says, "but, I've got a friend who's got an act called 'The Four Smart Girls' and the boss of the act is getting married and leaving the act and she wants a replacement.... So, that was me.

SB: Oh, were you?

MK: So, I was one of 'The Four Smart Girls'. Three accordionists and one violinist and that was a lovely act.

SB: Was it?

MK: But, the only thing was that the sister who took over the act didn't really know about show business and we ended up working some terrible dumps and my mother said, "That won't do" so that's when she put an ad in The Stage.

SB: Oh, yes. In The Stage.

MK: And I went solo then.

SB: And what did you call yourself?

MK: Marion Olive.

SB: Oh right.

MK: Because that's my middle name – Olive.

SB: And what happened after the war?

MK: Well, I was working for Jack Gillam then.

SB: Oh yes.

MK: Did several shows for him.... And Pantos. And then, this one show was where I met my husband.

SB: Oh yes?

MK: And he was doing the act with his sister.

SB: Oh.

MK: And he'd done a springboard act before that. Then, as the boys were getting stropy because he knew that he couldn't get any more boys to do the act so it got down to three boys and my sister-in-law and the boys – because there were a lot of props – springboard act – carpet and everything – and they just used to leave my husband to pack it all up! [Both laugh]. So they was on the bill with Gaston Palmer and he took a shine to my husband – I don't know why – and he says, "I can do a lot better than I do on the stage", he says, "Come in the dressing room" and he was doing all this marvellous juggling and he said, "I don't do it on the stage, they wouldn't understand [laugh].

SB: Really!

MK: So, he said to my husband, "I don't know why you're doing all this, can't you do a little act with your sister and forget about these boys – I mean, they're all right on the stage but they're not helping you, you're doing it all yourself". So, he was still working with one boy at the finish and my sister-in-law and the boy was always saying, "Oh, I've hurt myself" and all this and all the rest of it. And he was on the bill with Harry Champion, I think and the boy wouldn't go on because he wanted more money, you know, so my husband says, "We'll do a little bit of an act" So, Harry Champion went on the stage and said, "They're e partner is ill and can't perform but the brother and sister are going to do the best they can" and.... The Konyots were born!

SB: Oh, really!

MK: Yes. And so, he never had the boy back again. So, that's the act they were doing when I met them and it was nice and we were in this show for two years.

SB: Gosh.

MK: And then they decided that my husband had to go and work National Importance, like....in a factory or something. So, it was very funny because they called my husband up to Harry Dennis's office.

SB: Oh, really?

MK: And he had an office then with Joe [?] Cohen – together - and, also, there was the manager of Woolwich.... the theatre in Woolwich – can't remember what it was - and these men from Scotland Yard or wherever they were from. So, they told my husband, "Well, I'm afraid you finish now... as of now". [Laughs]. Not the end of the week or anything.

SB: Oh no!

MK: And the theatre manager said, "Well, can't he finish the week!" So, they said, "No, no, that's how we do business here", but they were very nice. They took my husband to a Post Office, so he could take out money for his parents. Then, we decided to get married.

SB: Oh, did you? At that point?

MK: Yes, because I knew he was leaving the show. So, I put my notice in as well but I had to do two more weeks. Of course, everyone was trying to talk me out of it – including Jack Gillam – and I said, "No, no, I'm going, I'm going" [Both laugh]. So, I came down to London, got married on the Monday, we had a week 'out' that was it, and stayed the week in London and actually we spent the whole week teaching my

husband's two sisters to do the act and then I had to go back and do another week in the show, which was very difficult.

SB: Mmm.

MK: But then I came back. We used to go and see the shows.... Brixton, Empress. Camberwell Palace and everything and Mr. Shinburn [?], I think his name was, who owned Camberwell, Palace and he said, "When are you going to do an act? I could use you for Pantomime". So, he (Bob) said, "I can't.... I can't get out of the factory". He says, "Oh, well you let me know". So, finally, he got permission to leave and so we dashed down to Camberwell Palace, just before Christmas, and Mr. Shinburn said, "Oh, I've already got another act!" So he says, "Never mind, never mind, I'll put them in the Kitchen Scene and I'll put you before the finale".

SB: Oh really.

MK: And so my husband said – we didn't even discuss money, he was so happy to be able to work – and he said, "I can't pay you more than fifteen". Which wasn't really allowed because there was a minimum for foreign acts in those days. I think it was £45.

SB: Really?

MK: Minimum. And, he said, " She'll have to do parts in the Panto". And Robert said, "That's alright". "And you two – Genie in the Lamp and.... I was something else, and we did the Panto in Southend – Regal, I think it was called – and the following year he paid us the £45.

SB: Oh, good! [Both laugh].

MK: He was a very nice man. There was, also, a two handed act that had just come out of the army and they wanted to do a Musical Act but they didn't have enough money for the instruments and he gave them the money, to buy a trombone and a trumpet.

SB: Really?

MK: Yes. Shinburn. He was a marvellous man. [Pause]. So, we started doing the act.

SB: And was it the act 'As Known'?

[Both laugh]

MK: Yes! But it took me a long time because I couldn't do all the tricks that my sister-in-law had done but....

SB: And what did she do? Now that she wasn't involved?

MK: My sister-in-law?

SB: Yes.

MK: Well, she was doing the act with her sister.

SB: Oh, so the two of them did it, as well?

MK: Yes. So, we went into another show and this guy had several revues. One of them, Norman Wisdom was in. But, wasn't in our show. And when we went to rehearse, this little man came in with an overcoat, like Columbo, you know [both laugh] and Robert said, "Do you think he's alright for money?" [Both laugh] and somebody said, "Oh, yes. Do you know 'Heinz', the jeweller's?" He said, "Well, that's Mr. Heinz" [Both laugh].

SB: Oh, really.

MK: And also.....That wasn't his name. His name was Hammer. Will Hammer!

SB: Oh, Will Hammer, yes!

MK: And there's a building in Wardour Street called 'Hammer House' and of course, he made all the films.

SB: Horror movies. Yes.

MK: Yes. And, he was very nice. We were very lucky with people we worked with. So, after that we went into... Oh, I know, Mike O Lyon became our agent.

SB: and did you work exclusively with him?

MK: No. Never signed anything. Just a handshake. He saw our act and he said, "I'm going to put you in a Western Show 'Harry Lester and His Hayseeds' and he said, "You'll get a good spot and you'll work through the show in different sketches. So, we went with him for four years. We used to have breaks and we'd do Variety on our own and Harry Foster had shown some interest in us and so we were working Finsbury Park

Empire and Robert kept saying, "Oh, we must write to Harry Foster and say we're here". So, as it happened, we were on the bill with Bobby Breen...

SB: Oh yes.

MK: The singer who was Harry Foster's act, so he came in, came up to the dressing room and said, "Yes, your act is alright but I've written down several things I want you to cut out and change" and things like that. Of course, we were willing. Then he came again, at the end of the week, and said, "I've got the chance to put you in a show on Broadway, with 'Hellzapoppin'"

SB: Oh.

MK: But it wasn't called 'Hellzapoppin' then, it was called 'Pardon Our French'. And, that was with Harry Foster and Nat Donnell. So, we were on Broadway for a year.

SB: That's good, isn't it? What year was that? What sort of year, have you any idea?

MK: '50.

SB: Oh, '50.

MK: And that was a wonderful show.

SB: Mmm.

MK: With wonderful people and after the show finished we stayed with them. We went to Las Vegas, all over the place.

SB: Mmm.

MK: And we came back to England for a while and did some Variety and then they came to England and we did the tour with them.

SB: So, when you were on tour with that kind of a show, did you travel by train, or car or how did you.....?

MK: Well, in America we had to travel by train, because they wouldn't allow anybody to drive, in case they had an accident.

SB: Oh, right.

MK: So, what happened.... Ole Olson had an accident in his car and broke his leg!  
[Laugh].

SB: Oh, no.

MK: So he started the show with his leg in plaster! [Laugh]. But, no we weren't allowed to use cars.

SB: And what about in England.

MK: Oh, yes. Yes, it was different.

SB: Yes, well the distances are shorter too, aren't they? And where did it play... did it play all over the country? Was that Hellzaoppin' that you're, actually.....?

MK: Yes. And in the finish, they joined up with Harold Steiman's Skating Vanities – Roller Skating – He's the guy who had the Dancing Waters - So, we were there for a year, travelling around, and the show was sort of half and half. Except that we were working in arenas, you know.

SB: Oh, it was a big.... Not theatres?

MK: No.

SB: So, did you do Moss Empire dates?

MK: Oh, yes. In-between. Yes.

SB: So, I wanted to ask you about 'digs'. Did you have a permanent home when you were in England?

MK: Oh, yes. We lived in Brixton. Everybody lived in Brixton [Both laugh].

SB: Everybody lived in Brixton!

MK: Max Wall.....all of them.

SB: And, was it difficult to keep a home going... and digs?

MK: Well, our family lived in the house.

SB: Oh, right.

MK: My mother-in-law and the two girls when they were in London and eventually, my mother made it up with me [Laughs] and came to live with us as well.

SB: So, there was always someone at the base?

MK: Oh, yes.

SB: And did you used to go and stay in digs? Or did you get flats?

MK: No, no. We always stayed in digs – unless Summer Season.

SB: Yes.

MK: Summer Season we would find somewhere.

SB: Did you have any favourite digs or do you remember any terrible ones?

MK: Both! [Both laugh]. Both. But most of them... they were wonderful.

SB: Probably because they enjoyed taking people from the theatre.

MK: Yes.

SB: And when you started to have children, when you had Martin, did you travel with him, before he had to go to school or .... did you take him round with you?

MK: Yes, I had him while my husband was still in the factory.

SB: Oh, right, yes. So, you were at home to begin with.

MK: So, I was home then. And then we.... I had a Nanny at first. She had the downstairs room and she had a little girl and she used to look after my son and I came home one week and he was calling her 'Mummy' and I thought, "Nup, that's it, that's it". And I never left him again.

SB:

MK: So, we travelled him and he used to go to a different school every week, even in America.

SB: Really?

MK: You know, you rang up, "Where's the nearest school" and he went. Went to, I think it was, Minneapolis, and the teacher said, "Oh, it's been a pleasure having your son". I don't know if I can say this..... She said, "I've had a photo taken". So, there's this picture and all the kids are black, except my son.

SB: Really?

MK: So, until he was eleven.... Yes, that was it... then he had to go to a boarding school.

SB: And where did he go?

MK: Well, I wanted him to go Conti's [Italia Conti] but they didn't cater for... you could only just go there for school so we found a place – I think they advertised in The Stage – very nice people in Cheam.

SB: Oh, yes.

MK: So, he went there. I always remember.... because as I say, I hadn't left him, I used to take him to school, bring him home.... And I went to visit him in the school and she said, "Oh, he's not here. He's gone up to Victoria to get something for me." And I said, "On his own!" [Laughs].

SB: Gosh!

MK: But, they were the making of him.

SB: He followed in your footsteps, didn't he? For a time.

MK: Well, she said, "He's ..." – because they taught singing and that, but she says, "He's very good. He could get into the Kingston Technical School. So, I said, "Oh, yes?" [Both laugh]. So, he went. He started and he was living at home. He used to go back and forth. And, he came to visit us in Scarborough, I think, and we had a scene, a Charleston Scene, and my husband wasn't a dancer and so, I was trying to teach him this Charleston and I'm not much of a teacher. So, my son was up, with us so he says, "Oh, I'll show him how to do it". So, he's on the side of the stage, trying to teach my husband to do the Charleston. So, Bill Robertson,

SB: Oh yes.

MK: .... who produced the show, he said, "Why don't you do..." – because my son was big by then – "Why don't you do the Charleston with your son?" he wasn't too bad. So, he did and he was with the show and enjoying it and at the end of the Summer Season, he said, "Do I have to go back to that school?" because by then he'd found himself a girlfriend.

SB: Oh, right.

MK: So, from then on, every summer he was in the Summer Show and ... we did Wimbledon and my son and my husband were Broker's Men, I think it was, with Tommy Trinder.

SB: Oh right.

MK: And also Jon Pertwee in a Summer Show and when we went to Jersey he got friendly with one of the girls... then they decided to do the act as well.

SB: [Laughs] and how did you feel about that?

MK: Oh, fine. Yes. Because, by then we were working mostly abroad.

SB: Yes.

MK: So, they had plenty of work. They did television and everything. They were at Babbacombe and she was expecting and when she had my Grandson, I said, "When are you going to start working again?" you know. He says, " Oh, well now I've got a son I'm giving up the act, I'm giving up the business. I'm not going to drag my son around the world, like you did.... And I thought he was enjoying it! [Both laugh].

SB: He probably was but.... [Both laugh]. Oh, my goodness. You know, when you were on bills, did you..... I suppose as a Speciality Act you didn't clash with anybody else on the bill... as far as.... you know, sometimes there were two or three Comedians.

MK: Yeh?

SB: Did you get on well with everybody?

MK: Oh, yes.

SB: And the Tops of the Bill. Were they always friendly?

MK: Not always! But, I'd go out of my way, if somebody said, "Oh, I don't like him, he's.... so and so". And I'd go down and ask for a photograph.. [Both laugh] so that always broke them down... [SB: laughs]. The only place where we had similar acts was at the Hansa.

SB: Oh, yes!

MK: They would always have a couple of Comedy Acts on.

SB: Yeh. And you worked on the Continent a lot?

MK: Oh, yes. Especially when the theatres were closing.

SB: Yes.

MK: And for the last ten years we worked for a guy[Andrew Heller] who put on this show of all old people and they had two midgets who came up out of the audience and he said, "This is a birthday surprise for you. Remember all those Pro's we used to work with?.... and the rest of it. Well, they've all come to do their act once more, for you".

SB: Oh, really? [SB: laughs].

MK: And they sat on the stage, on the side of the stage the whole time, [Both laugh] which was a bit disconcerting but we got used to that and wonderful acts. We had Magic Acts, Whistlers, The Clark Brothers

SB: Oh yeh.

MK: And well, as I say, we toured for ten years with this show.

SB: Good gracious.

MK: And we finished up on Broadway again with the show.

SB: Really?

MK: Yes.

SB: That's amazing. And did you actually retire at any point? Or did you just keep going, for as long as you could?

MK: Well, that was the last place we worked.

SB: Well, that's a good place to finish! [Both laugh]. Very good place to finish. Well, thank you very much, Marion, that's been very interesting.

MK: Thank you.

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