

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Shelli Cingalee – interview transcript

Interviewer: Sue Barbour

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Magician. Russ Abbott; agents; backstage; digs; The Great Cingalee; Paula Lee; relations with other acts; touring.

SB: This is Sue Barbour interviewing Shelli Cingalee and first of all Shelli, I'd just like to confirm that it's OK with you to use this interview for the British Library Theatre Project and for future generations to learn about Variety Theatre?

SC: Absolutely, that's not a problem at all.

SB: OK. First of all Shelli I want to ask you.... Where you were born and let me know when you first realised that your parents were involved with theatre.

SC: OK. I was born in Blackpool because they'd moved there probably just a couple of years before I was born. And, I think really absolutely from the minute I can remember anything it was theatre. You know, doing little songs, just Mum and Dad talking about shows. I'm talking about probably can remember things from about three or four years old.

SB: Really?

SC: Yes. As young as that. Mum telling us, "We're going into a show", "We did this", pictures, telling us who they'd worked with on bills and my Nan, because they were all involved, the whole family, I just can't ever actually remember a time when they didn't talk about shows, or theatre or "and do you remember when we played that place" and who was on the bill. They're memories were just absolutely fantastic.

SB: And did you always think that you were going to follow in their footsteps?

SC: Yes. I was a typical person who didn't want to go to school. I'd have been happy to just.... "Put me on the stage" and carry on and they did, from a very early age, really. We were still school, we used to go away for Pantomimes with them and Mum would say, "Well look, if we put can you in the act for a certain number of weeks, will you do

it?" Didn't even need asking. I was there, with a costume on and doing it [SB: laughs] - performing – absolutely, always what I wanted to do.

SB: And when you went away, where did you stay?

SC: Caravans. Yes, we had our own caravan. And as we got older and my sister and I started to work with them, we got two caravans. We had our own and became quite posh but up until then we stayed with them in the caravan. It was cheap digs.

SB: Yes.

SC: Absolutely.

SB: Did you ever stay in proper digs?

SC: There were times. I can remember, I was probably about at the time six/seventeen, maybe eighteen we went up to Scotland, and it was just after Panto and we'd done a week at Southport, King's Casino and Dad said, "It just isn't worth taking the caravan up there, the weather's going to be horrendous". It was Inverness.

SB:

SC: Yes. So, we went and we stayed in digs and that was fantastic. They were just the old gas fires, and it was typical stairs a great big Stag's head picture up at the top and we had great fun. [Laugh]. Loved it!

SB: You did?

SC: Absolutely, yeh.

SB: And how did other children at school.... How did they feel about... or did they know that you're parents were in show business?

SC: Oh, yes. Well, I couldn't keep quiet about it, to be honest. Sometimes it got me in trouble, they were always saying, "You're going on about your Mum and Dad". But, really I was so proud of it, it didn't matter and they thought it was great. They really thought it was great, my mates. They never actually came and saw me in shows but they loved saying, "My friend, Michelle...." [SB: laughs] "My friend Shelli". They loved me and they never treated me..... or were horrible to me. They thought it was great.

SB: Did you think there were any downsides of being in show business?

SC: 'er I don't think any downsides, the only time.... Was sometimes Mum and Dad used to go away. It was more when they were doing... it went a little bit from Variety - they were still doing Variety, still doing the act - and it went from theatres to clubs. And they used to sometimes... Cabaret, for weeks of Cabaret, and they used to always go away, it felt like a Sunny Sunday and I still, to this day, do not like actually Sunny Sundays where most people love them but for me, we'd always used to have our Sunday Dinner and then... or we used to stay with my Nan - if they went away to do.... Say three or four days Cabaret or a week's Cabaret and we always seemed to be waving them off on a Sunny Sunday and that was the only thing I didn't like about it and leaving them after a Summer Season, I used to come home and to have to go back to school, for the few weeks before they came home and I hated that because I just wanted to be with them all the time. I loved being in the theatre. From a very early age, I can remember, we did a season in Porthcawl and Mum said, "Right, that's it, you're not doing anything. I used to sell programmes and when I got a bit meatier, I could use the weights and the brace and weights back stage, so I've always been in there with them.

SB: And you've always done anything as long as you're in the theatre.

SC: Spotlight when I was big enough to hold it and work it. Yes. Loved it.

SB: And you said... what did your Nan used to do? Before she looked after you?

SC: My Grandma used to assist my Granddad in his act, who was The Great Cingalee. He did a big illusion act and she was his main 'side-kick' for want of a better work, his assistant and she did that up until... really...he became very ill and he couldn't work any more. And that's when she, more or less, started to take over us. And Mum actually took a year out when she.... after she'd had us and thought what was she going to do and she was really scared about doing the act again because that's why she never called herself Cingalee. She called herself Paula Lee. So she had the 'Lee' part of the name. But, she was petrified in case she failed. She said, "People who know me, will know me but if they don't [whispers] it won't matter. And she was alright and she went on to have many, many years as a success.

SB: Yes, she did. And do you remember meeting... how did you feel about other r people on the bill, if you went, you know, to see the shows?

SC: Oh, I loved it. I mean, I was in everyone's dressing room and they used to have to drag me out and Mum would say, "If she's a nuisance, just chuck her out" and they'd say, "No, she's fine". And I'd sit and watch the girls put their make-up on and I'd go and watch the shows and probably by about week one I could do everyone's act because that's what you did and you either loved it or you didn't and I did. There wasn't a time I didn't like it and meeting the people. I can remember, Mum and Dad going to, in Chester, the Theatre Royal, and it was more Cabaret we met like The Black Abbotts,

Russ Abbott whoMum and Dad just... I can remember before the boys went Pro and Mum said, "Oh, he came in, Russ, one day, and he didn't have a shirt and Dad said Here you are, I've been on take my shirt" and he wore Dad's shirt and he never forgot it. Years and years later, when he was quite successful, we met him and he remembered and.... Great stories really because Mum and Dad were quite a bit old when I was born and my Dad was fifty when I was born.

SB: Oh, right.

SC: Yeh, and he was twenty years older than Mum and so many stories like, he'd worked with Danny La Rue when Danny was Danny Carroll in 'Soldiers in Skirts' and things like that and then we met up with him and.... Actually great moments. I remember going to the Water Rats one time and it was just Dad and we were going to meet him afterwards and Nan was with us and this guy comes in, "Hello, Marie, I'm your ARGENT, for some reason he always called it 'ARGENT' instead of Agent and it was Billy Marsh!

SB: Oh really? [Laughs].

SC: And it was just great, the people that I met. And I've met since through the business. I loved it.

SB: Yes.

SC: I just loved it.

SB: And what was it like living in Blackpool with all the theatres? I mean, did you get opportunities to go and see them?

SC: Oh, I don't know there's a show we never saw. There was never a show that we didn't see. Unfortunately, while Mum was alive, we only worked one season and that was at Central Pier for Terry Cantor but the shows... we used to just go and see every one.

SB: And did your parents ever talk about what it was like working with different.... You know, like Comics and Singers? Did everybody get on well? Was it like a family feel?

SC: Oh yes. I mean, there was a time, even down to.... I remember my Mum and Dad talking in a club and on this particular bill - it was like a Theatre Club - and it was Variety and there was like eight different Comics and Dad said you couldn't believe it - not one crossed over the other.

SB: Really?

SC: So it was really quite..... 'er

SB: So, people kept to their own....

SC: Oh, absolutely, they could do that. I never really felt any animosity from other acts towards my Mum and Dad or my Mum and Dad towards other acts.

SB: Mmm.

SC: People had their favourites because that's what it's like; they make friends, but no.

SB: So, did your parents have a particular agent? Billy Marsh was whose agent? Your Nan's or....

SC: Grand-dad's yeh and then really Mum and Dad, they just worked at that time, once they got back into theatre, with whoever would book them. It may be, Terry Cantor or whoever it might be. They didn't have a Sole Agent at that time, because the business had changed quite a lot.

SB: Yes, that's right. Do you ever remember seeing them in Variety?

SC: Who, my Dad? Oh no... yes, Well, Variety... more Summer Seasons, that sort of thing. Many shows. Production Shows and things. Yes. Porthcawl, Southport, many, many years of doing that.

SB: OK. Well, thank you very much, Shelli, for letting me talk to you.

SC: It's a pleasure. Not a problem.