

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Barry Craine – interview transcript

Interviewer: Sue Barbour

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Summary Variety artiste, Comedian. American theatre; band calls; The Bathroom; Collins' Music Hall, Islington Green; comedy routines; costume; digs; Fred Karno's Army; Tony Hancock; North-East Clubs; The Three Hats; touring; variety billing; Max Wall.

SB: This is Sue Barbour from the University of Sheffield interviewing Barry Crane who is... an Equity member, fully paid up, and a performer

BC: Life member!

SB: Life member? Well, that's even better! And first of all, I just want to check with you, Barry, that it's OK for me to... for this interview to be used for the British Library Theatre Project and for future generations to access information about what it was like to appear in Variety?

BC: Yes. Fully agreed.

SB: Good. First of all, can I just ask you how you came to be in show business... whether you had any family involved with it at all or... How did it start?

BC: Yes, my mother was in show business. She did an act called The Three Hats. As far as I can remember her sister was part of the act – I don't know who the third one was – and they used to bring me up out of the audience as a naughty little schoolboy. They used to do a lot of juggling and knock-about.

SB: Oh.

BC: But I used to come and just interfere with the act, which at the time was a very popular style of working... Due, a lot, to Fred Karno, who had this show called Fred Karno's Speechless Comedians which, as it says, is just comedians that were totally visual and this was a visual... I used to talk quite a bit. You know, I'd say different things – I can't quite remember now but yes, we did that for about a year when I was about twelve. And we went to America and we worked there but the problem was, in America,

that they started to bring – I forget what they called it – the prevention of children working in theatre.

SB: Oh, yes.

BC: But down south, in the Southern States, it wasn't so bad. They used to have – oh, Gosh, I wish I could remember! – a theatre for black artistes... that if you were coloured or semi-white, you could still work them. In fact, some people used to black up so they could... white people used to black up so that they could work down South, because you could get away with things like that – working with children and things that were normally prevented up north.

SB: Oh, right. Then, you came back to England and what happened?

BC: We came back to England, then, shortly after that was the war and I came out of the business and went to – I joined the Merchant Navy and I was sixteen when my dad – this is not connected with show business – but he was the captain of the ship. At that time he would be about... he was too old to fight actively but we used to pick up a ship from the builders – like... the last one was at Pwllheli in North Wales... take it round to Southampton, ready for the invasion.

SB: Oh, right.

BC: And that was it. I remember he used to say to me, 'Keep your eyes open for submarines. Get you're binoculars out...' (he said, looking out to sea), 'Don't look out to sea. Look inland', he says, 'Because they come in between the shore and us, so we can't see them'. Right, so that's that bit...

SB: So, you left? At the end of the war, what did you do?

BC: After that, I went into the Army. I was in The Hitler Show! [SB: laughs]. Did quite well in that. [Both laugh]. Came out of The Hitler Show and went back into variety – on my own – for about two years and then Korea came along and I went to Korea. I rather liked soldiering.

SB: Oh, really?

BC: But there were other reasons – political reasons – for which I wanted to go to Korea, and all I got out of that was a pension. Disability pension, which has come in very handy, thank you very much, over the years. Then, I went back, after that, I went back into what was left of variety.

SB: Yes, and what sort of act did you do?

BC: I did, what they call today 'stand-up'.

SB: Right.

BC: I did a lot of tap dancing. What they call 'Close beat tap dancing' which is 'not off the ground' Not on your toes, sort of thing, like the choreographed Fred Astaire type of thing which is off the ground but, if you like, the Black American style of dancing which is close beat. Did a lot of that... eccentric dancing. I tried to emulate Max Wall. I loved his work. And the other person I admired was Dickie Henderson.

SB: Yes!

BC: I was that style. Cool... what today is called 'cool' – we called it 'laid back'.

SB: And did you work variety theatres?

BC: Yes, yes I did Collins' Theatre, which was... Shall I talk about Collins'?

SB: Yes. Yes. Please do.

BC: I don't know if anybody else had but it was a very little theatre. It was on Islington Green, and Chaplin [Charlie Chaplin] had played there, way back and I think, Fred Karno had put shows through there. And to get to it, you walked through the far end of the Green and there would be shops and cafes and then you had this frontage of Collins'. And to the left of a sort of a pub window, there was a black door that went into a passage and then you went down, underneath, to get to the dressing rooms – along a passageway underneath – and sometimes you'd look up and you'd see rats running along the hot water pipes...

SB: Really?

BC: Yes and dressing rooms were pretty dingy.

SB: Mmm.

BC: And very damp... Collins'... I always liked working there because I used to live in St. John's Wood and I used to get a 19 bus, all the way from Baker Street so I loved Collins'.

SB: And did you do theatres all over the country or?

BC: Yes, yes. Toured... did all the variety theatres. All over.

SB: Sort of Moss Empires?

BC: Yes, I did the Moss Empires with revue.

SB: Right.

BC: For Phil Hindin.

SB: Yes.

BC: Hindin, Richards and Hicks. Cyril Dowler. We did all those in revue. My forte really was revue.

SB: Mmm.

BC: I was a good dancer. A reasonable singer and a very good comic actor.

SB: Yes.

BC: Good, as they say, 'in production'.

SB: Yes. And when you were on tour, did you... what did you do... did you stay in digs, or...?

BC: Oh, yes, yes. There are so many stories about digs. I think everybody's heard all the stories about digs, really. My routine... I had a routine... I didn't drink at all except on Sunday night... when I got to the town, wherever we were going, I would go straight to the pub, if they were still open and I would have a drink. A really good drink. And I used to wonder how I ever found the digs when I came out! [Both laugh]. Because I used to enjoy this so much. That was my one, sort of, freedom time, when I just let myself go. But, during the week, I never drank at all. Never drank at all. Monday morning I would go down to the theatre, get my mail, if there was any. I hadn't got girlfriends or anything. I never really bothered with girlfriends, funnily enough to say. I was very hetero - not at all gay, no inclinations that way - but I was always sort of very... I'd had brief encounters with girls and I used to say, you know, 'Are you coming out on Saturday?' And they'd get this thing... 'Oh, I'm washing my hair!' [Both laugh] and I

thought, 'Oh, thanks very much. I can't be bothered with all that. I'll go out and have a drink with the lads and have a laugh'. Talk about football or whatever.

SB: Yes.

BC: And I never got really messing about with girls until I got to Japan... [both laugh] and that is an interesting story which I'm not going into now! [both laugh]. Anyway, so I'd go in on Monday morning and get my mail and do my washing and then, if the Stage Manager would allow me, I would go on the stage and practice my tap dancing, my eccentric dancing, my exercises... erm, I play piano a lot.

SB: Oh, right.

BC: So, that was it and I really loved the routine. Life was, sort of, very cut and dried.

SB: And how did you... obviously, they were on bills were they? Or, in revue, there would be different artistes... did you always get on well with people?

BC: Yes. Looking back... You've made me realise I kept pretty much to myself. A bit of a loner.

SB: Were you?

BC: But yes, I got on Dear old Max Wall said to me, one day, 'You're like me, aren't you?' I said, 'In what way?' He said, 'I'm a loner, who gets on with people'. I don't know many people like that but there are a few. Yes, in variety it was the old thing of seeing people that you knew and who were you with last week and when you talked to the landlady on the Sunday night. You got into the digs and you'd say, 'Who was here last week?' And that way you'd get to know who was doing well. I went to one place in Aldershot. I said, 'Who was here last week?' She said, [impression of landlady] 'Oh, lovely fella called Syd Field. Oh, he was funny. Oh, he used to ride his bicycle backwards, up and down the road. He used to get very drunk but he was a lovely, very funny man'. So, then I thought, 'Sid Field, yes, one day I shall see him' but, of course, we all know that he finished up, probably, one of the funniest comedians we've ever had. I think, the funniest was Dan Leno and then prior to that, probably, Grimaldi.

SB: Yes.

BC: I know, for a fact, Max Wall got a lot of his inspiration, if you like, from Grock, the Swiss Clown.

SB: And who, in your... You said Max Wall influenced you and Dickie Henderson...

BC: Yes, well, when I came home from Korea - I had been away for two years you know, and I thought, 'Right, here we go I'm going to be a Star' - we all say that, don't we? - 'I'm going to see what the competition's like'. I went round and I saw Norman Wisdom, bless his heart, somewhere and I thought, 'Yeah, well, that's all right' and then I saw Dickie Henderson and I thought, 'I like that, cool' and at that time the comics all used to wear a Trilby hat, as though they'd just come in off the street. A lot of them used to say... used to just run on as if they'd just jumped off a bus and get to the microphone, and the front of the hat was always turned up because of the spotlight.

SB: Oh! That was why!

BC: Always turned up. In fact, I was talking to - a long time ago - Bless him, Tony Hancock and he said, 'Yes, I, when I first started, I used to come on with the hat', and he said, 'And when somebody said to me, "Don't wear the hat! The Americans don't wear the hat. The Dinner Suit, straight on, talk!" So', he said, 'I'd got the hat and I couldn't go on without it, so', he said, 'so, I used to go on and put it in my back pocket and I felt', he said, 'As long as I've got my hat in my back pocket', he said, 'I felt comfortable'.

SB: Mmm. Really?

BC: In his comfort zone, yes.

SB: So, you wore a suit, did you? A kind of suave...

BC: Well, yes I wore a... I remember a young kid came up to me and said, 'You're all right, mate. How wide are them trousers of yours?' I said, '16 inch bottoms'. He said, 'Cor! Yeah, luvverly'. [Both laugh] And I thought, 'At least, I'm pleasing somebody, you know!' and you try to keep up with the general trend of things.

SB: Yes.

BC: Because as soon as you walk on... that's the deciding point. People will look at you and say, 'I don't like this bloke', or 'I do like this bloke' or 'I love this bloke'. That's what it's all about, really.

SB: And how did you deal with the times out of work?

BC: There wasn't a lot. When you had... for instance: I had a pantomime for three consecutive years at Bristol Hippodrome which, if I remember rightly, was twelve weeks... that's three months, isn't it?

SB: Mmm. Yes.

BC: For three months... you know, that's a long time and then, Summer Season, probably up to twenty weeks, twenty one weeks. If it wasn't good you'd get one of sixteen weeks and you thought you weren't doing well with a sixteen-week season but Summer Season... twenty-one weeks, pantomime and in between variety, so by and large sometimes you'd look forward to a week out. I remember I had a week out, once, and I thought, 'Oh, lovely, I've got a week out!' so where did I go? Straight down the West End, straight into a Night Club and I saw two girls there and I thought, 'Yes!', but not, there again, trying to as they say today 'pull 'em'. I just heard them talking and thought, 'Oh, they're in show business - chorus girls'. So, I said, 'Hello, my name's Barry...' da-di-da... a few drinks and one of them – I've got to be very careful here, I'm not going to say the name! If you want to write to me, I'll tell you who it was – but one of them left and I was left with the other one and we got on enormously well. She was a black girl, and that's as far as I'll go... And I left her... we went for a drink in a café called The Harmony Inn which used to be in Archer Street where all the musicians used to hang out and this was open 'til midnight/one o'clock in the morning and used to have coffee and what-have-you and I was drinking tea with her and a friend of mine came in – a very good looking guy with another friend of his. He was Manager of Festival Ballet and as soon as he saw this girl I was with, he was 'Hello, Darling...da-di-da' and he was sort of trying to row me out, as they say. And at the end, I was a bit tired and I'd been working all day and I said, 'I've got to get up tomorrow morning to rehearse'. Do my rehearsal at nine o'clock at Dineley Studios... and I walked away and next morning, after that, he phoned me up and said, 'You know that girl you were with last night?' I said, 'Yes'. He said... now this is where I've got to be careful... well, anyway, she was discovered that night, in the cabaret where she was working and from then onwards she became very famous.

SB: Oh!

BC: But at the time, I do remember, I sort of proposed to her in a strange sort of way... you know, 'Don't look at that bird, that's the girl I'm going to marry!' [both laugh] That was the first proposal I ever made. There we are!

SB: Ah! So, with variety, did you travel by train? Or how did you get about?

BC: I never had a car. No, I used to go by train.

SB: Did you?

BC: Yes. In those days, of course, in variety, if you booked so many people – within the show – you got a free coach for the scenery.

SB: Oh?

BC: Oh yes! Did you not know that? Oh, only for a certain number. I think it was 21. I think it was 21 that British Rail – it wasn't British Rail then, was it? The Great Western Railway or London North Eastern or the Southern Railway. They would give you a free coach for your scenery if you had a certain number. I think it was 21. Yes.

SB: Oh, so the management would try and get all the people to travel by train?

BC: Yes. And I was one of those people that would never bother fixing digs. I don't know what you'd call me. I suppose – not lazy – indolent. I never used to bother.

SB: And you always managed to get somewhere?

BC: Well, one time, we were going up to Middlesbrough - Hippodrome, was it? – Middlesbrough, and there were two guys with me. The Manager of our show – Manager-cum-Principal Comedian – and as we went up, the further we went up – of course, things were a lot slower then – trains weren't quite so fast... we started... we went past the Midlands and it started to snow... and I looked - the window was covered with snow... we got, at about 10 o'clock to Middlesbrough... now, think of this. And every door we knocked on they said, 'Oh, I'm sorry we've got so and so...' and we couldn't get digs anywhere and we got to one place where a very, very attractive landlady came out – quite young – very young in fact – and I'm with this guy - no names, no! - and she said, 'Yes, I think I can take you' and he just grabbed hold of her and kissed her. [both laugh] I don't know what you'd call that... impulse?... repression?... sex maniac? [Both laugh] I don't know, but... we lost the digs!

SB: Oh, really?

BC: Oh, yes! She... well, obviously... she said, 'I'm not having that, get away with you. What are you doing? Oh, no, don't do that!' and that was the end of that one. And there again, no names... well, he's gone now but he was a lovely guy. I loved him. A real character. But there were so many real characters in those days. I mean, not pretend characters. Genuine. Real characters.

SB: And did you find there were ever any feelings between say, the Top of the Bill... I mean... did everyone get on well together?

BC: It varied, but by and large there was this - with people at the top - very often friction about your billing whether you were what they called a 'strong top' – you'd have your name across the top or 'shared top' – right at the top of the poster, you'd have a kind of divide with two names, left and right. In black... was considered stronger than red. Or there was royal blue and red. All the posters that you see of those days. And blue was considered just a bit stronger than red. But I never got to that status, you know... I was down amongst the wines and spirits! You know what that is?

SB: No.

BC: Oh... At the bottom of a programme of all the Variety theatres you'd get all the information... not very often... you wouldn't get the year, but you'd get the date and the prices... who'd be on next week and various people advertising – local people advertising. And right at the bottom – you could hardly see it – were - in little small letters - were what wines and spirits you could buy in the bar, and they used to say if you weren't doing too well you were down amongst the wines and spirits!

SB: [Laughs] Oh.

BC: Yes.

SB: And did you... I was always interested to know... As a comedian or if you did comedy, did you discuss with the other comics what you were doing or... because... about doing the same gags and that kind of thing?

BC: Yup. Speaking personally... I was always... I went for an audition once and a guy said to me... he said, 'Yes, I want to book you'. His name was Sid Elgar – he's gone – he said, 'Yes, I want to book you'. I said, 'But I didn't do so well, did I?'. He said, 'No, you didn't. But', he said, 'Last week we had a guy here, came out and did the whole of Jimmy Wheeler's act, word for word.', he said, 'You... everything you did was original.'. I said, 'Well, I do try and be original', I said, 'At home,' I said, 'I've got a script... it's that thick, three inches thick. No laughs, just a script that thick!'. [Both laugh] I did try to be creative – I'm still creative – and I try to be... I'd sooner try and think of something interesting, even if it's just an ordinary sentence... I was going somewhere there and I've forgotten what I was going to say... what was the question?

SB: To do with... well, I just wondered... if other comedians, whether you discussed gags.

BC: No, no the thing was... in Variety, what you did... On a Monday morning you went down to the theatre and you had your band parts and the microphone – there would be a centre... what we call centre stage... sometimes there was a mic there, sometimes there wasn't... what they call a 'riser'. A riser was a microphone they used to pull a rope and the mike used to rise up in front of you and if you were standing over it, you know, you had a nasty shock! [SB: laughs] But, what you did, you put your music to the left of the centre and then when the orchestra leader came out he would take it [the music] from the centre and work outwards. So, if you were late, you arrived at the end and you had to wait. But, what would happen is... you'd start off and you'd say, 'Yes, well, I start off with... if you play me on with eight bars blues for about four bars and I'll stop you and go into this gag... la di da di da...' Now then, sometimes if you were using a gag, a joke or a situation that was done by somebody else.... All the would look up at you as much as to say, 'You thieving git!'.

SB: Really?

BC: Oh, yes. Yeah, I mean, Max Wall had his material, everybody had their own material and if you were stealing... I mean, today it's unbelievable... in fact, that's why I packed doing clubs up a long time ago because you would go... I went to one place and I had a very good act – I was doing impressions – of John Lennon and Yoko Ono – people would phone up and say, 'Are you the guy that does John Lennon and Y...' and I'd say, 'Yes'. 'Want to use you...da di da di da'. And I was doing very well with this act and one night I went out and died on my feet. And as I turned round to do a change, I looked at the drummer and said, 'What's the matter with these people?' He said, 'A guy did your act last week, word for word'. And I thought, 'Well, I can't fight...' That's when I started bringing back my tap dancing. I thought, 'If I do a great wallop...' - what we called a wallop in the old days – 'They can't nick that!'. Neither could they! Well, there we are.

SB: No, that's sad, isn't it, that ... and you'd think people would have a lot more respect then for... they didn't... I mean... I know they maybe took the odd gags somewhere else but not where everybody knew whose it was.

BC: Yes, I would always understand that because if you're working... the comics' graveyard - if anybody comes from the North East, I do apologise! The reason it was the comics' graveyard, because up in the North East of England there were so many clubs that literally, I mean, I did... you would sometimes get two or three big clubs almost within the same street so they were seeing so much comedy. But, if you were up there - and, don't forget, you didn't have Social Security, if you didn't work, you didn't get paid.

SB: No.

BC: And I had two children and if you've got two kids plus a mortgage or rent to find and things weren't going well, you would look around and see somebody doing very well, you thought, 'Well, OK, I'll do a bit of that'.

SB: Yes.

BC: I mean, it was a question of survival.

SB: Yes.

BC: If you had any sort of self-respect, you would change it round a little bit.

SB: So, did you have to... if you were working the North East or whatever... you had to get somewhere to stay. Did you keep a home going, as well?

BC: Oh, yes.

SB: And did you find that difficult, to pay for two lots of accommodation? Or was it just part of the...

BC: Yes. It wasn't easy. A lot of the time, it wasn't easy, with a family. I remember several times, driving... doing your act, finishing maybe midnight and I used to drive home from Newcastle... I remember one time I drove home from Newcastle to London, overnight, so I could be there the next day for my little boy's birthday. So...

SB: Yes. So you tried to... they stayed at home did they?

BC: Oh, yes. Yes.

SB: And did you ever take them... I mean... was that before Summer Season?

BC: Oh, yes. No, no, no... the upside was that right until they were five years of age, they would come with me to Summer Seasons, oh lovely! You know, Babbacombe, what? Every day. Oh, a little story about Babbacombe, where... I was Principal Comedian there and one day I'm there, on the beach, with the kids, my wife... it's a lovely sunny day and all of a sudden my wife said, 'Is it Wednesday today?' 'Argh! Matinée!' [Both laugh]. And you've never seen anybody run up those cliffs so fast. Talk about a commando. My commando training came in handy, actually. [laughs]

SB: Oh my goodness!

BC: Well, there we are.

SB: So it was... when you went for a Summer Season you had the family there. What did you.... Did you rent a flat, or?

BC: Oh, yes. Yes. We would rent a flat. And it was lovely, lovely for the whole family. You know, you'd spend a lot of... once you'd got the first... you see, Summer Season, basically speaking you would do – with Hedley Claxton, who was a famous impresario...

SB: Oh, yes.

BC: you would do five programmes and in the dressing room – you know, in the old days, in the kitchen you'd have a pulley, with a clothes rack...

SB: Oh yes.

BC: And you'd pull the pulley up to the ceiling, over where the fire was, to dry off all the clothes? Well, he used to have these pulleys with all the costumes on there. So, number 1 programme would be on one pulley, number 2, 3, 4, 5... so you knew where all your costumes were.

SB: Oh.

BC: But, I mean, to get into a... the first two weeks and rehearse five programmes... as a comedian, you'd do two spots plus all your sketches... do the songs... so, you were very busy, you had a lot to do... but once you got that over, it was wonderful, just lovely... playing golf every morning.

SB: Yes. So did you think that most of show business is a good thing to be in? I mean, you enjoyed it? Your career?

BC: I enjoyed it immensely. Yes. There were sometimes very difficult times but... I would do it again... for the simple reason that [BC laughs] I'm not very clever! [SB laughs]. [pause] I'm too thick to do anything else! No. My mum... I had to do it really because my mum – her name was Deeta Clare – This is the one that was doing The Three Hats.

SB: The jugglers.

BC: But later on, like all Variety performers. They used to think that they had some – within them deep down in their soul – some actor or actress. And mum thought she was – and she was a very good actress. She became an actress, as I say and her name was Deeta Clare. Liverpool Playgoers Club and she used to – perhaps a good story to finish on.... When I was six years of age, my mum was in a play – a one-act play – I think, it was by John Galsworthy, called The Bathroom. Now, this is a one act play about a man who is in the bathroom, and all you see on stage is in the left hand corner of the bedroom: you see the bathroom, the door - just the door: a practical door - open and you see the shadow of the man, shaving with a cut-throat razor. Good cue for music there.... Daa daa, da da da da – cutthroat razor and she's nagging him... his wife is nagging him and this is what mum did for the whole hour or however long it lasted. And in the end he cuts his throat. You see the shadow and she goes in and says, 'Argh! My God! Alfred. Alfred!' and she used to say to me, 'Barry... Mummy's going to rehearse. You sit there and you're going to be Alfred!' Now, look... can you see my goose pimples? Every time I tell the story and think about it, even to this day, and I'm 81... I get goose pimples, so that must have done something to me.

SB: Yes.

BC: Set something in my mind.

SB: And actually, I don't want to quite finish on that story because I want you to tell me about when you worked at Bristol. You did some acting yourself?

BC: Well, yes. At Bristol Old Vic.

SB: Yes.

BC: Do you want the whole story?

SB: Yes.

BC: Well, this brings everything up to about ten years ago, when I was having a very hard time. Money was very short and I just hadn't got any work. And I looked in The Stage and it said, 'Wanted. Comedian/Actor/Dancer/Singer [would be advantage to be able to drive] in a profit sharing touring thing. Well, I think they call it Fringe Theatre or something. And I thought, 'Well, I've got to do something'. So, I wrote off to these people. Meanwhile, I did an audition for 42nd Street, I did an audition for Chicago and Pirates of Penzance. I didn't tell you that one before. Pirates of Penzance. One of them was in Manchester and I didn't want to go to Manchester for several reasons. It was always a difficult theatre to get digs and at that time – oh, yes that was it – at that time in Manchester, Pirates of Penzance was on and it's a big cast.

SB: Yes.

BC: Digs were very difficult and I thought, 'I can't be bothered looking for digs like that. And 42nd Street...'. They said they didn't want me and then I did another audition for Bristol Old Vic... a show called Fred Karno's Army ... wonderful, wonderful musical drama about the story of Fred Karno and I played Harry Weldon. Anyway, I did this audition and the guy said to me, he said, 'Barry, we'd like to book you, you know', he said, 'We can let you know now, if you want to do it'. So, I thought, 'Yes, a bird in the hand. Do it!'. Seven weeks... Bristol.... Lovely. So, I took that and when I got home the next day – on the Monday – the phone went. My wife said, 'Yes. Who is it?' He said, 'Where's Barry?', so she said, 'Why? Who is this?' He said, 'This is 42nd Street. He's supposed to be here'. She said, 'You said you didn't want him'. He said, 'I know. We got the cards mixed up!' and that was that one.

SB: [Laughs].

BC: But I'd got Fred Karno's Army, which was a great show. Daily Telegraph said, "This show must go to New York. Will go to London. See it, now, while you can". But, like a lot of things... It's difficult sometimes to put certain shows in, if the theatre isn't big enough or if they haven't got the star to take the lead, or if they haven't got enough room for whatever the show requires in the way of scenery or whatever.

SB: Well, you never know, it's never too late!

BC: No, it's never too late. Yes.

SB: Anyway, It's been a pleasure talking to you. Thank you very much.

BC: It's been my pleasure. Thanks very much.

SB: Thank you.