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Jack Kodell and Mary Naylor – interview transcript

Interviewer: Sue Barbour

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Magician and musician. Agents (Cecil Buckingham, Foster's Agency); George Black; Belita; bill matter; Blackpool theatres (North Pier, Opera House); Champagne on Ice; Kirby Wires; Dave Morris; Vic Oliver; Tesse O'Shea; Dick Richards; training birds.

MN: It was a marvellous show, in a way, because it was wood [a stage] for the first half and ice [an ice show] for the second half.

SB: What? Champagne on Ice was?

MN: Champagne on Ice.

SB: Oh, really?

MN: And I was supposed to be the Leading Lady of the first half and then she took over and she did some marvellous things. She did a ballet scene that was incredible.

SB: What was her name?

MN: Belita.

SB: Oh, yes.

MN: It was when Ebb Tide, the song Ebb Tide – it was semi-classic- it was very big. So, they put on Ebb Tide and she went up on this ladder, backstage. Huge ladder – it went on forever, and she was on a...

JK: Harness.

MN: What's the name of it?

SB: Kirby.

MN: In a Kirby harness and then she'd fly... but, it was under water... so, we had this great big stage set – it looked like she was under water - so, she'd dive in and she did it like a mermaid without being a mermaid and she did all the ballet spins – because she was a brilliant ballet dancer – and she did all the spins on this thing [the Kirby harness] and they said, 'nobody's ever done anything, on strings, what this women could do'.

SB: Really?

JK: She was very good.

MN: And there was no ice then. That was the first half. But, anyway, when the billing came out it was all her and I had this little thing here and they went mad to change it – I don't know if it ever got changed or not – but, in the programmes they were [changed]. And I did this thing... it was an Australian boy – I don't know his name, I've forgotten – and I liked everybody I ever met, but there was something about this man that I couldn't stand and he looked like a truck driver and we had this one scene where we had to sing a love song together, and I had skates on and he'd be at the front and the only way we could get – I could skate, I could stand up but I couldn't do... He was a good skater and so was my family but I never did skate: I could go but - get started - but...

JK: [inaudible]

MN: but stopping... I couldn't do that – so, the only way to do it – they said, 'Can you skate, Mary?', I said, 'Yes, I can stand and go round but I can't stop'. So, this boy stood right by the conductor, in front of the conductor, on stage so that I could go into his arms and [all laugh] I used to cling on to him for dear life and you could hear the audience saying, 'Oh, there's something between those two' and I hated this boy with a vengeance [all laugh]. I'll never forget that – I was swinging on his arms. And one girl – you know how you get the gossip?

SB: Yes.

MN: This one girl, who was one of the chorus girls said, 'You know, it's so unfair -' and she actually believed what she was saying, because I had all the arms and the body right but paralysed down here, let's face it [points to feet] 'It's so unfair. Belita's so strong – Mary Naylor, you can tell she's a dam' good skater but they won't let her do anything because she mustn't be any better than Belita'. 'Well', I said, 'She didn't! Who was it? Because I'll kiss her!' [All laugh]. And it went all through the entire cast that they wouldn't let me do my solo on ice and before long... I was a gold medallist! [all laugh]. Isn't that a beautiful thing?

SB: Yes.

MN: I used to make one big sweep round him and think, 'Please be there for me!' Because I would have gone right over the top, I had no idea how to stop.

SB: Where was that show?

MN: The Hippodrome.

SB: Oh, that was at the Hippodrome? Oh, gosh.

JK: Champagne on Ice – a wonderful show.

MN: And then he [Jack] worked with her too. She was the Principal Boy on ice. Wasn't she? Belita.

JK: Yes.

MN: Or was it the Summer Season she did on ice?

JK: No. She was Principal Boy on ice at Clark Langdon's Earls Court.

SB: There was a theatre at Earls Court?

MN: No, not a theatre.

SB: Oh, an ice rink?

JK: The Empress Hall.

MN: 7,000 [seating] wasn't it?

JK: Yes.

MN: But you see, Jack was a good enough skater so, with those little birds, he could really move – I couldn't believe it – he was just lucky that he could skate because he was from Minnesota and everybody skated there. They had their own little ice rinks.

SB: Yes. So did the birds have personalities?

JK: Yes.

MN: Oh, yes.

SB: And did they have good and bad nights or were they always good? Consistent?

JK: They were always good. No, the birds were always good - like my little lady! Always good.

MN: Did you tell her why?

JK: Why?

MN: Because they were well trained, weren't they?

JK: Yes, they were trained. They were trained birds.

MN: He didn't say... 'You do this or you do that'... this one bird only did this and this one only did that. Now, he talks about his magic but a lot of this wasn't magic... it was well-trained birds.

SB: Mmm.

MN: They did it all. And the magicians would say, 'How did you do this' and that's why he's not copied that much. The dove act was - the pigeon act - but nobody's got the patience to train like that.

SB: So, it took a long time to train them, but how long do they live?

JK: Twelve, thirteen years.

MN: It took eighteen months to train them.

JK: Two years.

SB: Mmm. [pause] I wanted to ask you, Mary, about Blackpool, when you did the Summer Season there, with Tessie O'Shea. Tell me a bit about that. What do you remember about it?

MN: Actually, I did three in a row. I did the North Pier first, then the Opera House, with Tess. I did the first with Dave Morris when he had just heard – I thought he was a very funny man and I never knew him before... Somehow he had wangled his kid – his only daughter married an American – to be one of the first to go as a G.I. Bride. The war was still on. I was there in 1945 when the invasion was just over, when there were Americans coming with bomb shock and combat shock – and there was a terrible scene when one of them put a gun in a young girl's mouth in the caves there – I can't think of their name but it starts with an F – you go that way for one place and St. Anne's in the other.

SB: Fleetwood.

MN: Fleetwood Caves and he was loving her in the caves and he put a gun in her mouth and shot her. It was a big scandal.

SB: So, Dave Morris, what kind of a comedian was he?

MN: One of the funniest men I ever saw. He was as blind as a bat and he used it to be funny.

SB: Oh, really.

MN: And he sent his daughter off, and immediately she got there she was killed in a car crash, so the season I was there he was really in mourning. But for all he was in mourning with his lovely little very, very orthodox Jewish wife, it was sad because they really mourned and they were in pain for this girl but for all that, on stage, he was the funniest... He did a typewriting bit and he was trying to spell and he'd go, 'With a ber, with a ler and an o o and a der der der' and he'd use his eyes really close to the tape, using the fact that he was blind, he was hysterical – I can't make it sound funny – but he was. And I had a chance in the On With The Show show with Lawrence Wright, to do what I wanted, which I did my variety act in the middle, and it was incredible because I could not go wrong and I did some lovely things and one of the songs I did was a piece called Say A Prayer For The Boys Over There.

JK: I thought you did your interview yesterday!

SB: But there's more. I want to hear more. So, Dave Morris was the North Pier?

MN: Yes.

SB: And the next year you went to... where? The Opera House?

MN: Yes. The Opera House on the strength of doing this one song because they said, 'She didn't sing it, she lived it', and they used to say, 'She's one of the young performers that can literally make an audience cry and laugh' and I thought that was marvellous, so for the rest of my career I always used to make them have a little laugh and a tear.

SB: By the way, did either of you have 'bill matter'? On the bill...

JK: "Moon-Kissed Voice of Radio".

SB: Was that was yours was?

MN: Well, it was Dick Richards of the Sunday Pictorial who said, "Mary Naylor is so smooth on that radio, she is the moon-kissed voice of the radio". And I hate to tell you what the comics - and particularly Ernie and Eric - did with that line "the moon-kissed voice of radio" they just changed the k to a p and it was really... wherever I went they'd say, 'Hey, you with the moon... voice of radio'. I used to say to myself, 'I'm sure Dicky Richards was very complimentary and he also said in that year that I was the up-and-coming, true all-round performer of that year, and Jessica Tandy was the up-and-coming actress, so we didn't do badly, did we?

SB: Oh, no you didn't. Who was on that bill at the Opera House, do you remember?

MN: Opera House, Blackpool?

SB: Was that the Tessie....

MN: Tessie, Jewel and Warris – Ben became our Best Man, eventually – a wonderful Spesh [Speciality] Act called "The Gango Brothers" and Juanita and Lucille Gaye – she was a brilliant, brilliant dancer – she went in as a dancer and came out as a sketch artiste and very good timing of a young comedienne. Very comedic. She discovered that. My understudy was a young Blackpool girl called Mimi Whittaker and she was a character, and I didn't realise she was so much older than me because she always looked younger but in actual fact, she was – I've just discovered, 10 years older than me. So when I was 20, she was 30, but you never would have known.

SB: Oh, really?

MN: Funny. Lots of chutzpah. I mean, she knew it all and she made fun of everything and made fun of life and she was a tonic. That was my little understudy and then following that... the following year, I was with Ralph Reader as his Leading Lady at The

Grand in which we had Reg Dixon and my understudy there was a young girl called... Jeannie Carson

SB: Oh yes.

MN: ...and I really did help her, I think – at least she always said I did – she did very well. She came to America with her husband Bill Lowe of The Two Lowe Brothers and he just took off and funnily enough Len Lowe and Bill Lowe were not related but they worked very hard to get this job... and they got it at the Palladium and as soon as they got it Bill went off to America with Jeannie and she did very well - she did a marvellous series on television in America.

SB: Oh, really.

MN: And she did very, very well. And I understand, now she has a school somewhere as an actress, I don't know where... somewhere in the north. But, she did very well. And there was a lot... Dickie Avery, Ducky Robinson - known as Cardew, the cad - we all chipped in... And going back to the Opera House - this is nothing to do with Variety, except that the Variety Artistes in general... the more talent they had, the less they knew about business off, and take my aunt, Tess [Tessie O'Shea], for instance. She was not my blood aunt but she always said I was the little girl she never had and I must say we did everything parallel together. We did the Command together and she died in America, only 30 miles up the road from me, in Leesburg, so we were together for the rest of our lives. But here was a lady who, before our time in the business... she was a giant and she was always alone and she took care of herself from the time she was a young girl – and her family – and to the end of her days she had to take care of herself, no-one took care of her. And when I went to the Opera House with her in '46, she had bought a whole string of cottages and she had made two cottages into one for herself. She also bought at the same time... she owned... when I started in the rehearsals with this lady she owned an early and late Chrysanthemum farm and an early and late tomato farm along with a street of offices. She had a mink coat. She had a Rolls Royce which, funnily enough, her pianist, Wally was the driver – the pianist! On goes different hats [Both laugh] – he wore many hats and he was adorable. And she had this man called David Rollo, a Captain in the army, that was her husband, I think just in name really, because I never saw them ever live together, and if they did it was for a very short time. Anyway, before the end of that season, my aunt had nothing. Everything was either given away to her new in-laws, I mean, the farms went, the streets of houses went, within eighteen months the car had gone and she finishes up... She had little homes everywhere – one in Elstree – I think it was Elstree – or Denham... wherever the big British studios were – Film studios – I think it was Denham. All her homes were gorgeous and she finished up, just before she came to America to work – and never did go back – she finished up in one little mews flat in London with very little of anything.

SB: So, that was after she got married, was it?

MN: As soon as she had nothing left, he emigrated to Australia, just out of the blue, he just left.

SB: Oh, dear.

MN: But she did call herself - incognito – Mrs. David Rollo. But, the other thing I was going to say about her was... she was so brilliant on stage, knowing exactly where she was going but off stage... not a clue! Recently, at the end of her life, she played for the British fortnight at Epcot [Walt Disney World] by the British pub and there was an old lady in the pub that played the piano too [Pam Broody] – very good friends they were – so, she's there for two weeks and they built a stage for her, a wooden stage in the middle of the village of this area. She walked on the stage and fell through it! And had concussion and as usual, most tolerant British, which can be a weakness as well as a strength; 'Oh no, I'm alright, I'm all right, don't fuss! I'm all right, I'm all right' and in actual fact, she was not all right and it turned out that this concussion was not taken care of so when she went out to work – and as soon as the spotlight hit her, she passed out and fell – fainted – I mean, she couldn't take the spotlight. She had a huge touring engagement in Australia, which she could not take. She lived on Social Security for the rest of those few months that she had left and we said to her, 'Well, why don't you sue Disney because you can not work any more?' 'Oh, I can't because he's been so good to me. He did give me those two weeks' work'. 'Yes, but he's insured for such things like that'. 'Well, I couldn't because I might want to work again and I don't want to be black-balled'.

SB: Oh, dear.

MN: That is what show people. Variety in those days was all about.

SB: Yes, the show must go on.

MN: They were scared of their own shadows and they were terrified of not being able to work again and they had to keep in favour with the bookers, the agents and the owners. Today, there's lots of things that I don't like about the way the business went, but the one I am pleased with is the fact that now they do have a chance to better themselves in the way of taking care of their future, which they didn't in those days. And I was on the end of that when I saw all this happening and it stayed with me.

SB: So, in the days of Variety, it was definitely 'The show must go on'?

MN: The show must go on!

SB: And not fall out with the managements.

MN: Do not fall out with the managements under any circumstances. Let them do what they like with you. Let them ruin your show. Let them do what they like. They are the bosses.

SB: Mmm. So, did you have a manager or an agent?

MN: Yes, I had. Really, it was funny because I had done three West End shows before my seventeenth birthday and Mr. George Black, who was an angel to me... I adored this man, he was lovely. He reminded me so much of my own father. He was beautiful. I met him when I was on my second revue in the West End, at the Vaudeville and he said, 'You're lovely and I would like you in my show. Do you have an agent?' and I said, 'No'. And he says, 'How much do you want?' and the old pros always told me, 'If any one ever asks you how much you want, or how much you're getting, always tell them more because they're going to beat you down anyway'. So, I was earning £42. 10s in the revue at the He said, 'How much are you earning, Mary?' and I crossed my fingers behind my back and said, '£50' and he said, 'Then £50 it is'. And I thought, 'for once, those good old Variety pros told me the right thing'. So, then with that, as I was leaving he said, 'Do you mean to tell me I have just said you are coming to me for £50 and you're coming into your third West End show and you still don't have an agent? You've done it all yourself?' and I said, 'I think so'. 'You've got to get an agent, Mary' and I said, 'OK'. So, while I was there he put me with Harry Foster, who, literally, did nothing for me, at all. I used to be scared to death. It was like going to see the dentist, going to see an agent. And I used to sit in the waiting room forever and then he would say, 'You look very nice' and 'Are you very happy' and 'That's good. Bye!'.

SB: Really?

MN: That was it. Yes. So, I met Cecil Buckingham, who was this little tiny – not a giant of an agent but he was the only one, I think, that did anything for me. He had Reg Dixon – 'Confidentially' Reg Dixon – not the Organist, the Comic – and myself and a few other people and it was amazing because I was never out of work when I was with him and I always knew where I was going for the following year, which never happened with Mr. Foster's agency and yet I adored Mr. Foster, when I got older – I thought he was lovely but I couldn't bear him as a child. I couldn't bear anybody because I was scared of them all!

SB: Yes.

MN: I mean, we were brought up to respect – well, our respect was carried over to let them do what they liked with you.

SB: Yes.

MN: I never met anyone in our business that was anything but kind and good and dear to me with the exception of one and that was Mr. Vic Oliver.

SB: Mmm.

MN: And I don't mind saying it because it's a fact. And he told me that, 'You'll never get anywhere, Mary, unless you get rid of your father'. And he had all these young talented girls floating around with him and I thought, 'Well, I'm not going to be one of those'.