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Billie Roper and Rex Roper – interview transcript

Interviewer: Sue Barbour

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Variety Artistes. Accommodation; casinos; Rex Grey Dancers; The Hansa, Hamburg; the Knife Throwing Denvers; military shows; Edith Piaf; rope tricks; Sheriff Danny Arnold; touring; Two Gun Rix; Boy Rex; variety (UK); variety (Germany and France).

SB: This is Sue Barbour from the University of Sheffield and I'm interviewing Rex and Billie Roper, who were Variety performers. First of all, I just want to ask you, Billie... do you agree that we can use this recording for the British Library Theatre Project and for future generations to learn about what it was like to be in variety theatre?

BR: We do.

SB: OK. First of all, I wonder, Billie, if you could tell me how Rex began in the business?

BR: Well, he originally started when he was about 14 years old and he was the youngest roper in show business and he worked with his father who was Two Gun...

RR: Two Gun Rix.

BR: Two Gun Rix. His father was a sharp-shooter and his sister worked with The Knife Throwing Denvers. He - from very, very young - was the world's youngest roper and he did the big lassos and he was called Boy Rex.

SB: Wow!

BR: When he was about 14, they said, 'You know, Rex, you're getting a bit older - we have to give you a name', so therefore they said... Len Lowe and people like that were the ones that turned around and said, 'Why don't you call yourself Rex Roper?' So, from when he was about 14, he became Rex Roper and he was one of the youngest people that did all the work that he did with ropes and whips. And he travelled with his father, because his father had this sideshow and that's recorded in the archives for show people. And from then, of course, he met and married and had an act with...

RR: The Knife Throwing Denvers?

BR: No, no not the Knife Throwing Denvers. That was your sister, Paddy.

RR: Oh yes.

BR: Then he had a girl who he met in the Big Big Camel Show and then they started to do a variety act and consequently toured all the theatres here in England. That ended in divorce and then he met me, when he was working a single. And I went over to Germany to see him at the Christmas time and while I was up there Joe and Daphne Lun turned round and said, 'Billie, go up there, when he asks for a volunteer you go onto the floor'. [SB: laughs]. So, of course, I went onto the floor and, of course, he cut the cigarette out of my mouth and they said, when I got back, 'Get her, she's got nerves of steel! She'll be ideal for the act'. So, what I did... I eventually gave up my job - because I was a beautician before that - and I went to Germany to join him, and I went with a little costume with... sort of the Western and the hat.

SB: Mmm.

BR: ... and after a few shows, I said, 'No, no, I want to take it to another level'. So, I said, 'No, I'll be the Showgirl', because I was learning to rope and whip. I said, 'No, it's going to be bitty. You are such a professional. It'll be you and I'll be the assistant, but I'll be the glamour assistant, like the Showgirl type' - leotards, tights - then we were at the Astoria, Bremen. We got a booking for the Astoria, Bremen, and from there we went to the Palladium, Düsseldorf, we went to Casanova, Essen, all these places.

SB: Yes.

BR: And while we were at the Casanova, Essen - we had a contract to go to the Touran - I don't know if you know that?

SB: Yes.

BR: The Terrace.

RR: Tarrace.

BR: And while we were there, they said, 'Your act is really no good for there because of the glass floor that comes up in the centre', so we rang the people immediately and said, 'I understand that our act is not really suitable for your venue'. So, we decided that we would go to Paris. So, we got on the train after the show, and it was all dark and everything and lying in there was an American guy and I said, 'It's the first time we've

been to Paris' and he said, 'Don't worry', and he said, 'I know a place and it's called the Rue de Londres. The lady is an ex-Bluebell girl, who runs it' and he said, 'I'll take you'. So we went there, and of course she welcomed us with open arms so we kept that as our home.

SB: Oh, really?

BR: Yes. So, she introduced us to all the agents in Paris. So, from there we did all the French... The Riviera, all the places. The Casinos, The Bobino... with people like Andre Salvador and...

SB: Were there a lot of acts working on the continent?

BR: Yes. Oh, you had a bill. A proper bill. You know, every show had its star and there were like, four acts in the first (half) and another four in the second half because it was all variety.

SB: Yes.

BR: Every type of act and most of them had the showgirls opening, you know, for the first and second half.

SB: Yes.

BR: And then all the acts would go from there.

SB: And did you meet up with any other English acts, over there?

BR: Yes. Like Joe and Daphne... yes.

RR: Joe and Daphne.

BR: Funnily enough, there wasn't that much... of the English acts that were in the Variety at that particular time.

RR: No, there wasn't.

SB: Really?

BR: They were mostly continental acts. And then when that was sort of finishing, all the ... because when you went to the Casinos, you were really only just two or three acts.

SB: Yes.

BR: It wasn't a big bill.

SB: And what did you... did you travel by car?

BR: No. We used to do a lot of train. Yes, we did a lot of train. Because he had his license we travelled by car but depending on where you go... I mean, sometimes it was miles travelling in the car, especially in France... all around the Pyrenees and all that sort of thing, just to go to a venue. Because a lot of the Casinos were ... so you needed a car, you couldn't go by a train to go to any of the Casinos.

SB: And what sort of places did you stay in?

BR: Well, we normally stayed in the pensiones. Those were the type of places that we stayed in.

SB: Yes. And you got your meals there?

BR: That's right. Yes, you had your meals but we were fortunate because having this permanent address in Paris, we would always use Paris as our base.

RR: Yes.

SB: Oh right.

BR: And then we worked that because we had our accommodation in the Rue de Londres with Madame Byone.

SB: And did you pay for the accommodation, just when you were staying there?

BR: No. No, we rented it all the time.

SB: The whole time? You kept it?

BR: We rented it all the time because that was fair. Because then, we could leave our stuff so... it's like being in a home.

SB: Yes, that's right.

BR: And then we went down... we worked... we did a television show... we were in Marseilles and we had done this little television show with La Compagne Chanson, I don't know if you remember them?

RR: Singers.

BR: Singing group.

RR: Seven.

BR: Yes. And this big orchestra. And we were playing in Marseilles and we went to the cinema in the afternoon and what was on in the cinema? We were watching ourselves! [All laugh]

SB: Oh, no! Really?

RR: Yes.

BR: It had gone round the cinemas. This little show package that they'd made...

SB: Did you get paid any extra for that?

BR: No! [All laugh]. Well, we didn't know what was going to happen...

RR: We didn't know it was happening.

BR: ... it was a bit of a con, like lots of things that performers get involved in. It was a little bit of a con. Yes... and then what happened was... we started doing the military.

SB: Oh yes. The bases?

BR: The bases. When they started. And of course we worked for the very first time with... what's the gentleman with his finger? The Irish Comic...

SB: Oh, Dave Allen.

BR: Dave Allen. Yes, he came and he sort of did his grounding over there for the American troops.

SB: Was that sort of Wiesbaden area?

BR: Yes. That was all round there.

RR: Yes.

BR: Because we were based... then we moved to Wiesbaden and I, my eldest son was born then, in the American... the Amelia Earhart hospital.

SB: Oh, really?

BR: Yes. Where McEnroe [John] was born. He was born there as well. And that's when we started doing like the military shows working for Blackburn. Alan Blackburn.

SB: Oh yes.

BR: A lot of shows for Alan Blackburn.

SB: And what sort of date... when was that? Do you know?

BR: Oh...

SB: How old's your son?

BR: He was two and he's 49 now! [All laugh].

SB: I think I can work that out. [Son born in 1959] [All laugh]. So, how did you cope... having a child?

BR: Well, he just came everywhere with us. You know, I mean that's the one where you showered him, bathed him, put him in his pyjamas, wrapped him up. There's been many a time when he's slept under the... in the office...

SB: Oh yes.

BR: where we're working. Pick them up, take them home and that's when we got our contract to work with Edith Piaf and we did two tours with her. And when we were at the Opera House in Lille, she got her chauffeur in her beautiful Mercedes – blue Mercedes, with a mahogany dashboard – and she got her chauffeur to drive us back to the hotel.

SB: Really?

BR: Yes. So that was really nice. And then, she wanted to take us to America with her but the thing was... getting the license... [Pause, while Rex goes out]

SB: And, I just wanted to ask you about your son. When he got to school age, did you still tour him or...?

BR: Well, what happened... when it was coming up... because my two boys were born in Germany – the eldest and the middle boy were both born in Germany – and because of their rule for National Service, we didn't want to stay in Germany any more. So, that's when we came back to England.

SB: Oh right.

BR: Yes. And then, of course, we did the work with Bob Monkhouse. We did all those ... because the theatres had all virtually closed so then it was the nightclubs.

SB: This was in the sixties?

BR: Yes, yes, and that's when the boys would come with us if it was for a week or two weeks... then I would bring the boys with us but naturally when they got older and then the schooling starts, we still tried to take them because we would still go over to The Hansa (Hamburg). We went about six times.

SB: Yes.

BR: To the Hansa... we would go and once we settled here we realised that really it wasn't financially viable to go and work places like the Hansa and that. You know, you were better off taking what was here.

SB: Mmm.

BR: But as I say, the shows, even the night clubs, started closing. People say it was like shows – one night here, one night there – then we started like the Town Halls, then that came into the equation.

SB: And where were you based during this... in England?

BR: Well, first... when we first came over here, we always lived in the South, near Wandsworth.

SB: Oh right.

BR: Because that's where Joy St. Claire. Joy and Ray St. Claire – he used to work for Billy Cotton's Band.

SB: Oh yes.

BR: Yes, he was the singer with Billy Cotton. They'd been over in Germany working for the troops, the same time as us so, we'd kept in touch and when I said we were coming back, she got us accommodation and it happened to be in Putney and when we were there I said, 'Oh God, I need a school for Tyron', so anyway I went around and of course it turned out to be a private school but it was the best thing that happened for him, because being completely new and that it was excellent for him. But, of course, we were paying for digs so I needed to find somewhere to live.

SB: Yes.

BR: So, we ended up living in Putney and we stayed with this wonderful – she was a White Russian lady – called Mrs... [Rex re-enters]...

SB: So, she was a White Russian? Wow!

BR: Yes and she ran an employment agency in Shaftesbury Avenue [Both laugh] and it was so funny because – as I said when we went there... to the place... she said, 'Well, you know, you've got two children and really it's only got the accommodation for one'. So, when we were going she said, 'Oh, before you go, I just want to pop down into the cellar' she said, 'And get your little boy a little present because I never see my Grandson, you know' she said, 'And he seems such a lovely little boy.'. So she went down into the cellar and my Darren went, 'Mrs. Trail! Mrs. Trail! Where are you, Mrs. Trail? What are you doing? Where have you gone?'. She came up and said, 'You can have the accommodation', she said, 'Even my own Grandson doesn't show that much concern for me!'. [BR and SB laugh]

SB: Really? [Laughs]

BR: Yes. So, we made that as our base and then of course we eventually moved to Wandsworth, where we are still now.

SB: Oh right... And did you work – when you worked in England – for any particular managements? Did you have an agent or did you...?

BR: Yes. Ma Braham. We used to do a lot... and Stone, because we used to do the nightclubs as well.

SB: Oh, did you? In London?

BR: In London. Edmondo Ross. But you see all of them have eventually all closed as well.

RR: Café Royal.

BR: Yes. All of those places like The Grosvenor, when they had all the dinners. The Dorchester... And we worked for the guy... what's his name who had all the dancers? He was quite a famous guy that had...

SB: I'm trying to think... who ran shows, do you mean?

BR: Yes. Yes and he was big in town. He had.... Oh, God, I can't think. Pam would know.

RR: She would know.

BR: Grey. Rex Grey.

SB: Oh, yes. Rex Grey. I know Rex Grey.

BR: Rex Grey. Rex Grey Dancers. And nearly always, the show was the Rex Grey Dancers, and at least two acts and then a Singer or Comic. And that was normally the shows that did the West End. Then, gradually the shows were going down so, I said to him, 'I really need to go and get a job' and he [Rex Roper] started working with Danny Arnold.

SB: Oh, right.

BR: Yes. You know because Danny had a show and he was down in Yarmouth.

RR: And Canada.

BR: So Rex went to join him and we went down with the children in the summer and then when that finished they, sort of, now did the act with the comedy and him [Rex] doing the roping and him [Danny] doing the comedy and of course eventually he [Rex] got so that he was ill and he couldn't work. And then he went up to... when The American Adventure opened.

SB: Oh, yes. That was near Nottingham, wasn't it?

BR: That's right. Yes. Ilkeston.

SB: Ilkestone, Derbyshire.

BR: Derbyshire. And before, it had been like some natural reserve with big ponds and trees but it didn't really take off so this guy from America came over and bought it and turned it into a whole Western thing. And he [Rex] did five years up there.

RR: Yes. We did OK.

BR: The season – long season and then he went with Danny to Germany to a place called Fort Fun because it's all Western. That was Fort Fun and of course he did what he was doing but - he did the tricks and everything – but then of course there was the comedy bit with Danny so I was sort of out of it.

SB: Oh.

BR: And that was that. I'd had my day! [All laugh].

RR: That was the finish.

BR: No, but it was good because I then had the children to look after. I could then go to work.

SB: Yes.

BR: And he was still doing what he could do best. Do you know what I mean?

SB: And did you miss the business when you gave up?

BR: Well, it got so that...

SB: It was the right time, was it?

BR: Well, I was working at Selfridges doing Pelham Puppets and Miriam [Ginette] was up there doing the Tarot Cards or something. She was a Psychic. Do you remember she did that sort of thing?

SB: Oh, yes.

BR: We all had to find other things to do but what used to happen... we still had shows up in town so I'd run into the cloakroom, put the tights on, you know, put the costume on, put the coat on. [BR and SB laugh]

SB: Oh gosh. After...

RR: That was fine. That was then.

BR: So that's why I was grateful when he started working with the other people.

SB: Did any of your children follow in your footsteps?

BR: No. No, none of them. No, Ty... because he saw the insecurity of it. And the two... Darren and Courtney... The younger one, Courtney, was in Oliver! and all those sorts of things but he turned out to be very dyslexic and as he got older it became a problem because they would send a script or something and of course he would learn this script and suddenly you get there, 'Cut scene... cut that' and of course the boy was... after sixteen he finished. I mean, there are big regrets from his point of view because he was in it from so young, so he really never had anything else.

SB: Yes.

BR: It's been very hard for him but the other two... Ty, as I say, was fortunate. He started at the ANZ Bank in town... in London. He went for an interview because he had eight 'O' levels. He got eight 'O' levels and he got a job with the Inland Revenue. He'd

already been for an interview for the ANZ Bank so, anyway, he had this letter from the Australia and New Zealand Bank saying, 'Can you please come. We are very interested'. And he said, 'Oh, Mum, I'm quite happy at the Inland Revenue'. And I said, 'The job you're doing at the Inland Revenue, doesn't take eight 'O' levels. You go to the Australia and New Zealand Bank'.

SB: So, his schooling wasn't interfered with by show business?

BR: No. No, we were very fortunate.

SB: Well, that's great.

BR: But I think we were very bonded with our children. Do you know what I mean? They didn't miss out on anything.

SB: Yes.

BR: And they've had experiences that maybe other children didn't have.

SB: Yes.

BR: Because an awful lot of people didn't take their children with them. But, I'm sorry... I was a hands-on mother.

SB: Yes.

BR: Do you know what I mean? If it could be done, I would do it. If it couldn't be done, then I wouldn't do it. It was so strange because when I had.... I don't know how many times we were at The Hansa [Hamburg], but I had Darren – Because there's like five years in between, so I've got this five year old and I've got a baby and they put us in digs and when I got back from the show the door to the kitchen – to be able to warm his milk – was locked. So, of course, next day I went straight up to see him and he was ever so good. He got us a place right outside one of the accommodations where you went through the back there.... I don't know if you remember it was a big building with lots of stairs – no elevators or anything –

SB: Yes.

BR: You just went through the courtyard and then you were more or less in the Stage Door. So, he got us in there.

SB: Well, I think we probably will finish the interview now. Thank you so much.