

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Maggie Little – interview transcript

Interviewer: Sue Barbour

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Variety artiste. Blackpool theatre-scene; chaperones; digs; Franklin's Musical Act; Sam Newsome; pantomime; Sherman Fisher Girls; Terry's Juveniles; touring; Florence Whiteley's Zio Angels; Lawrence Wright; Anne Ziegler and Webster Booth.

SB: This is Sue Barbour from the University of Sheffield. I'm interviewing Maggie Little – or Maggie Melody – and first of all Maggie, I'd like to ask you if you're in agreement for this recording to be used at the British Library, for the Theatre Project (1945-'68) and for future generations to learn about Variety Theatre?

ML: Yes, that's quite all right.

SB: OK, first of all, Maggie, I'd like to ask you where you were born and brought up? And were you from a show business family.... or not?

ML: No, not a show business family. No. It was just that... I lived in London, and did tap dancing lessons – a little local lady giving lessons in the house. And eventually... My father's brother was quite a bit of a traveller with Austin Reed, Gentleman's clothing shop.

SB: Oh, yes.

ML: And he always said, 'I think we ought to get you an audition with the Terry's Juveniles'... because she does quite a few shows, here and around, very well known. And so, they took me up for an audition and I had to go to Edgware - the Stoll Theatre, I think it was, at Edgware - but we went to Edgware, right at the end of the underground instead of Edgware Road so I was late at the audition.

SB: Oh!

ML: But anyway, directly Lawrie Wright saw me – because I was very, very small for my age anyway – he said, 'We'll have her anyway', although they had chosen all the juveniles, you see. He said, 'Well have her anyway, and she can understudy for the season, while the parents come up and take the others out for their holidays' and things

like that, you know, and that's how I ended up. But, of course, the first year, the War broke out and we all had to gather on the Pier, at the end of the North Pier - Blackpool pier. We all had to gather and he [Lawrence Wright] said, 'Well, that's the end of the show, I'm afraid. The end of the season, now'. So, we all had to go home. And all our parents came and collected us. And we ended back in London, just carried on. A bit of schooling and things. And then came up again for the following year and I was in my own right then, not just the understudy. Then that concluded at the end of that season and then the same thing happened again and when that season finished. From Terry's I just went to another dancing class – Sherman Fisher Girls – and then from there I went into Florence Whiteley's Zio Angels.

SB: Oh, did you?

ML: And we did The Phantom Guard and the Dance Militaire and... Six weeks at the Victoria Palace... and most of the theatres up and down the country. So, it was very interesting.

SB: Mmm. Now, in Terry's Juveniles, who were in the shows in Blackpool?

ML: At that time... the first year, I think it was... Tessa Dean was the female singer.

SB: Mmm.

ML: ... I'm just forgetting who the... Oh... I want to say George Formby... Frank Randle!

SB: Oh, Frank Randle.

ML: Frank Randle was the comedian and that was that season. And, of course, the following season was... the next season was Anne Ziegler and Webster Booth.

SB: Oh, right.

ML: And Dave Morris was the comic and then, of course, the third year...who was the third year? I'm getting older and my memory should be just as good... maybe the third year was Anne Ziegler and Webster Booth... I think it must be.

SB: Yes?

ML: It was '40 or '41. Yes.

SB: Well, I have actually... I've found a load of programmes from there... so, I'll look and check.

ML: Oh, right.

SB: So... The Zio Angels... did you tour with them?

ML: Yes. Yes, all the theatres. Yes.

SB: You did?

ML: Yes.

SB: And when you were in Terry's Juveniles, where did you stay, when you came up here? And did you have a chaperone?

ML: Oh, yes. We had two 'Aunties', as we had to call them. Auntie Nell and Auntie Flo – or something. And we stayed in a big house in Church Street in Blackpool. I know it's 253!

SB: Really?

ML: Yes.

SB: And you had full meals – full board, there?

ML: Yes. And, of course, the run of the house. It was a big four-storey, with a basement and everything. And the very first bomb was dropped at Seed Street or somewhere, in Blackpool and we all ran down... Oh, Cindy Birchall was the Baritone or Tenor or whatever and we all ran down to the basement, underneath, and we all sat there chatting and we wrote in each-other's autograph books and things like that. Nothing serious. It was only just one bomb dropped as they went over or something, you know. But that was that.

SB: Yes. And with The Zio Angels, did you stay in boarding houses?

ML: Yes. There used to be a Church book that used to go round [The Actor's Church Union digs book] or the landladies would meet us at the end of our train journey because train call was always on a Sunday.

SB: Yes.

ML: And we'd meet up – a lot of Pros on the other platform saying, 'Where are you going?' 'Oh, we're at the New Theatre, Northampton' or 'Dudley, Hippodrome'. All this was going around.

SB: Oh, was it?

ML: Yes.

SB: So, it was kind of fun, was it?

ML: Oh, yes! Yes, we used to like to meet up on the platforms there, on a Sunday.

SB: Yes.

ML: And then the landladies, sometimes, would meet the train...

SB: Really?

ML: Yes. 'How many?' 'Well, there's four of us'. Four of us always stayed together and we had a combined room. Like, two big double beds in it. And you used to take your own food in, for her to cook for you.

SB: Oh, did you?

ML: Yes, that was the idea of it. In those days. Yes. It's interesting. Mind you, when you put in about 50p - hark at me! What would it be? Say, Ten bob or something, each, it's amazing what you could buy, in those days.

SB: Yes. And did you find most of the landladies good? Or were there bad ones?

ML: Oh, yes. Well, there were some who used to boil sausages!

SB: Oh, did they?

ML: I never forgot that. I'd never had boiled sausages before! You know, but that was a special thing... whether it was a Scottish thing, I don't know – probably! - we were up in Scotland at the time... I don't remember. [Both laugh]

SB: Oh, gosh! And, how did you feel that everybody in the shows got on? I mean, did they get on well together? Was there any animosity?

ML: Not that I can remember. Oh, no. No, we were very lucky. In fact, there's another dancer, who lives in Blackpool here now – Betty - we meet up sometimes and she was in The Zio's with me and we chat about all the theatres and how we went... and the digs and things like that and it's fantastic the way we get together because we said, 'Who else can we talk to? Nobody else knows about the business that we went through', but, she and I can chat all day. We'd sit up in the café for an hour or so, just chatting about digs and what the places were like.

SB: Yes. And do you remember any of the particular digs that you liked?

ML: Well, I remember York. I think it was Spen Lane or something, with these two little old ladies and they were wonderful, we always used to think. Because... A different show... S.H. Newsome had the New Theatre at Coventry - Coventry Hippodrome - and his birthday week, he always made sure his show was in, that particular week.

SB: Oh, really?

ML: Mmm. And that was Nat Mills and Bobbie... Jessie Matthews came in as a guest star for that week.

SB: Wow!

ML: And G.H. Elliott. I've got the photograph.

SB: Oh, really.

ML: I know the recorder can't see the photograph but I'll show it to you in a moment. But it was very good, very exciting. We often say, you know, we wouldn't have had any other upbringing at all. It was wonderful really, when I think of my childhood.

SB: Yes.

ML: A nine to five job. No. That type of thing.

SB: So, you must have been quite young in The Zio Angels.

ML: Yes. I think I was about sixteen actually... when I first went with them.

SB: And the lady that ran it... was she very strict?

ML: Florence? [Whiteley] Yes, she was a lovely lady. Yes, she was a lovely lady.

SB: And did she come round with you?

ML: No, no. We were on our own then. She had one of the girls – probably the one of the older ones – as a Head Girl – that type of thing...

SB: Oh, right.

ML: ...to look after us but she wouldn't tour with us. But she might have done [in the past]. I think it was her husband that was a Stage Door-keeper at one of the big London theatres.

SB: Oh, really?

ML: Yes. I think that's how the theatre thing was with her.

SB: Oh, really? And so, what did you do after The Zio Angels? I mean, how long were you with them? The Zio Angels.

ML: Oh, probably about three or four years going from one show to another and then doing pantomimes. Then I joined up with a Musical Act – singing and dancing –

SB: And what was that called?

ML: That was called The Franklins - Franklin's Musical Act - and we did... Toured theatres and ended up doing London cabaret... that sort of thing.

SB: And did you do the Moss Empire dates?

ML: We did with the Zios. Yes. Oh, yes.

SB: And the Musical Act... how many people were in that?

ML: Just the two. It was a duo.

SB: Oh, yes.

ML: From then onwards I went to doing a solo act... on my own, as a singer and dancer.

SB: Did you?

ML: Yes.

SB: And where did you work then?

ML: Well, that was mostly Summer Seasons and Pantomime. I was Principal Girl in Cinderella – New Cross Empire – with... I can't think of his name now, isn't it awful... Janet Brown was Prince Charming.

SB: Oh, was she?

ML: Yes. And Doreen Harris was Dandini... Leon Cortez!

SB: Oh, yes.

ML: Doreen Harris was married to Leon Cortez. He was the... instead of being a young Buttons, he was an uncle type Buttons. We got around it that way.

SB: Oh, yes.

ML: He's supposed to be in love with Cinderella. Isn't he?

SB: Oh, yes.

ML: So, from then onwards I'd do Pantomime, Summer Season. At Skegness, many times with Ted Dwyer and his wife, Addie and...

SB: And were the seasons long in those days?

ML: Absolutely. Oh, yes. Yes, we did from May to the end of September and probably into October, sometimes.

SB: Oh, yes.

ML: And then the Musical Act... I went from there in Skegness... we joined a show and Tony - my husband Tony Melody - was the comic.

SB: Oh, was he? And whereabouts was that?

ML: That was at Skegness. At the Derbyshire Miners, the theatre there...

SB: Oh yes.

ML: ... and we met up there and then we did Pantomime where he was Buttons, so, instead of having a little, Leon Cortez, chubby one, I had a nice, tall 6ft 3ins Buttons then, so that was fun.

SB: And how long did you get married after that?

ML: Well, we were together for about eight years actually and then eventually we got married here in Blackpool. Yes. And we were married for about 36 years.

SB: Mmm. And you worked together did you, eventually.

ML: Yes, we managed to do sketches and things like that in Summer Season shows and in Pantomime we did duets together.

SB: So, do you ever see anybody else that was in the business, now? You were saying about your friend...

ML: Betty? Yes, Betty. She was married to Joe Lindsay. He was a comic here in Blackpool and she was in Zios and yes, we meet up and have a good old chat and now this new Debenhams is open we always go upstairs and we can sit in that café across the top in Debenhams and look at them all below us and we're chatting away there you know, we sit there, as I say, for an hour or so, just chatting.

SB: Yes, and did you, when you were with the Zio Angels, did you find that everybody treated you well, as dancers, like the rest of the bill and the Top of the Bill?

ML: Oh, yes.

SB: Was there anybody in particular you enjoyed working with?

ML: Well, Norman Evans – everybody says about Norman, how wonderful he was with the kids and he'd take us all out on trips.

SB: Oh, really?

ML: Oh, yes. Yes, he'd organise a trip out somewhere and buy us all lunch or tea or something but he was wonderful.

SB: Oh, good.

ML: Yes.

SB: I'm trying to think... when you were with the Zio Angels and you always went by train, you said... Is that correct?

ML: Yes.

SB: And then stayed at the digs. How did you... Did you pay for your own fares on the trains? Or, did the Company?

ML: No, the Company... with having so many tickets, they had a reduction in the...

SB: Oh, right.

ML: A block for the show. The scenery would go on great big trucks on another day.

SB: So, you'd all go together, so you'd mix in the carriages, that kind of thing?

ML: Oh, yes. Yes, yes. Little Danny O'Day was a lovely little comic, as well. He's - not going to say any more, I'm afraid - but he was married to a ballerina. In fact, they had twins and we used to say to him, 'How can you tell the difference?' and he'd say, 'Oh, I've never bothered!'. [Both laugh] But he was such a little sweetheart, I think, and he was in Last of the Summer Wine for quite a while, was Danny.

SB: Oh, was he?

ML: Yes. You know, the TV show. We'd always play pranks on each other. You know, put your reserved ticket on the back of your coat when you weren't looking. That type of thing.

SB: Oh, did they?

ML: They reserved all our carriages for us.

SB: And did you think that the trips were long? Or did it seem to be quite efficient? Or did you have a lot of changes?

ML: Well, there were always changes. Nearly always Crewe. You knew you'd meet up with somebody at Crewe, that's for sure. Yes, but the train journeys... well, sometimes you'd... perhaps you were in London and then you'd go up to the Midlands, somewhere. Like Dudley, Hippodrome or Wolverhampton or Birmingham Hippodrome and then perhaps up to Liverpool and even up to Scotland, Glasgow.

SB: And did you – while you were on tour – did you have a permanent home somewhere? Or your home was wherever you happened to be?

ML: Well, we lived in London mostly, then. But then, of course, the season the War started when I was up here in Blackpool and my parents came up from London and stayed in digs here and eventually we carried on staying here, you know, they didn't go back.

SB: Right. They did. So, when you had a week out, would you go back to your parents?

ML: Oh, yes. In fact, I can remember being in – and funnily enough, it was at Dudley, Hippodrome – and it was very foggy and Lou Marks, the Producer, said, 'I don't want any of you going anywhere too far away because the weather's so bad' and I thought, 'I must go home to Blackpool to my Mum'. So, of course, I did do. I changed at Stafford, then Crewe, and then I got on at Crewe and someone said, 'Oh, that's the next train to Blackpool, over the other side', 'OK', I went over there and – I think I was all on my own – not many people travelling on that particular night – I think it was Christmas Eve – and anyway, it got to Preston and it went right the way through Preston! So, then I thought, 'Well, that's strange. It doesn't usually stop at Preston, so it carried on through Preston... to Blackpool and one of the Conductors came along and I said, 'When are we into Blackpool?' And he said, "Oh, this is the milk train up into Carlisle!" So, I sat there because I was only about sixteen or seventeen or something like that and I just cried my eyes out because I thought, 'God! I'm not going to get home at all'. And my mother, it was going to be a surprise for her, you see. So, I spent the Christmas Day on Carlisle Station.

SB: Oh, no!

ML: And waiting for the next train back down to Dudley. And then Crewe, and then Stafford and then Dudley Hippodrome... and that was my Christmas!

SB: Oh no!

ML: and then everybody was saying, did you enjoy yourself? 'Oh...' I said, 'Yes, Carlisle Station! It was marvellous!' - you know, a youngster as well... it was frightening.

SB: Yes, and probably at Christmas there weren't many trains?

ML: No. it was terrible. Yes...

SB: Yes... Oh, dear!

ML: But anyway... I read in the paper once about 'how did you spend... not exciting Christmas, but one you'll never forget' and I thought, 'I've been tempted many times to mention it' you know. Yes.

SB: And so, your parents never attempted going back to London?

ML: No. No, they stayed up here.

SB: And, over the years, have you been in to see all the other shows that are on in Blackpool?

ML: Oh, yes. Whenever I can. I do, yes.

SB: So, you've watched it transform?

ML: Yes, it has changed a lot, I must admit. But, when you talk to people about the digs that we stayed in, they can't believe that we did... just youngsters travelling all on your own.

SB: No, it's amazing. And, of course, did you ever travel by car later on? Or...?

ML: Sometimes, in the pantomime season when the... some would go by their own cars... or some lived in the area where the Pantomime was... that type of thing, but as

far as Summer Seasons... you just stayed in the digs the whole... months you were there.

SB: Yes. Are there any other stories you can think of?

ML: I don't know, really. There probably will be when we've finished. When you've gone I'll probably think, 'Oh, I wish I'd mentioned... something', but at this moment in time, probably not.

SB: Well, I can always ask you again.

ML: Oh right.

SB: OK. Well, thank you very much, Maggie. That was very interesting.