

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Gerry Atkins – interview transcript

Interviewer: Sue Barbour

1 June 2009

Dancer. The Adventures of David Crockett; Atkins and Brandon. Can Can; Catlin's; digs; Folies Bergere; Roger Stephanie; The Tivoli Circuit; touring; Palace Theatre, Westcliff; The Windmill Revue Goes A Million.

SB: This is Sue Barbour with the University of Sheffield interviewing Gerry Atkins. And first of all, Gerry, I'd like to ask you if you're in agreement with this interview being used for the British Library Theatre Project and for future generations to learn about Variety Theatre and Light Entertainment?

GA: Yes, of course.

SB: The first question I'd like to ask you is... where you were born and brought up and did you come from a show business family?

GA: Well, I was born in Rayleigh, went to school there... dancing school in Wickford, which was the next town – very good dancing school – I started dancing at the age of eleven and went to the dancing school until fifteen when I started working.

SB: Family? Anybody in the business?

GA: Well, my mother played the piano. She used to teach the local children, that's all.

SB: Did she ever accompany you, ever?

GA: No. No never.

SB: Right. So, tell me about your first job.

GA: First job... I went for an audition for strong, male, classical ballet dancers and I was only fifteen but I got the job. I suspect they were in short supply of male dancers at that time [Both laugh] as it was only in 1954 – not so many years after the war [World War Two] really – and that was for Zip Goes A Million, and the tour lasted for four months and we travelled over England... and saw quite a bit of England.

SB: So, whereabouts did it go? Was it like the major theatres?

GA: Well, we opened in Golders Green.

SB: Oh, did you?

GA: Golders Green, Hippodrome. And from there we did... oh...we did Streatham Hill and then we started really travelling.... Birmingham... I'd have to get the list to rattle off a few names.

SB: What did you do.... Was it sort of like Manchester and places?

GA: Er... no. I think it was because the show had already been on tour before.

SB: Oh, right.

GA: This was a second – maybe even a third – tour.

SB: Oh, right. So, in it, you... classical?

GA: I was one of the dancers. I don't know why they asked for male classical dancers. Maybe it was because Pauline Grant was the choreographer.

SB: Oh, right.

GA: Yes, because actually the work was Modern [Dance].

SB: So, how did you travel in those days?

GA: By train.

SB: Did you?

GA: Everything went by train.

SB: Mmm.

GA: Train Call on Sunday. Arriving. Walking to find the digs.

SB: And how did you find out about digs? Did you book in advance?

GA: Usually. Yes. I think there was a book from the Actor's Church Union...

SB: Right.

GA: with addresses in – it's all coming back to me now.

SB: Yes. And you used to get in touch with the people or...?

GA: Yes. You used to write letters, of course. I don't think people made telephone calls in those days... it was too expensive! [Both laugh]

SB: So, on the train... did you enjoy that? Was it fun?

GA: Oh, yes! Throughout my career I travelled a lot and I've said I'm 50% tourist at heart and 50% Artiste.

SB: Like us all!

GA: Yes.

SB: So, the digs... Can you remember any good or bad digs... or anything?

GA: Oh.... Digs in Plymouth! I think the couple originally had a fish and chip shop because we had chips with every meal! It was £2 15 shillings full board. That I can remember. And I think the geyser in the bathroom exploded at one point. What else do I remember about digs? [pause]

SB: So, when you finished Zip Goes A Million...

GA: Yes?

SB: What happened after that?

GA: Well, I was out of work and I used to go to auditions but then people used to say to me - whoever I auditioned for – They'd say, 'I'm sorry, but you look too young', because then I was only just sixteen.

SB: Mmm.

GA: So, I did an ordinary job at the time. I worked for Rayleigh Post Office. I worked in an accountant's office and then I did Summer Season.

SB: And how did you get that? Was that an audition?

GA: It was another audition, which I got... for the Jimmy Ramsey Dancers for Catlins. A 22-week Summer Season in Worthing at the Pier Pavilion.

SB: Really! And where did you stay that summer?

GA: I had a rented room. Just a rented room and I had one gas ring. And I used to cook all my meals and I'm proud to say, I don't think I ate out once. Maybe because I didn't have the money! [Both laugh]

SB: And so after that Summer Season what...?

GA: Oh, the Summer Season finished on a Saturday and on the following Monday I started rehearsals for a tour of Can Can.

SB: Wow!

GA: And that show lasted a year and we went all the way up to Aberdeen. And, of course, working Glasgow, Edinburgh and the all the big cities in England.

SB: And that was on the train as well, was it?

GA: Always by train, yes.

SB: Did you ever stop at Crewe?

GA: Well, I'm sure we went through it, many, many times [Both laugh]. And I guess changing trains, as well.

SB: Yes. So, did the scenery and everything go on the same train?

GA: Yes, I think so. They had special trains, didn't they, to transport the shows?

SB: Yes, I think so... on a Sunday.

GA: Yes. A special wagon – a long one – didn't they? ... to get in all the 'cloths' and things... I think so.

SB: Did they? Oh, gosh... Wow!

GA: I think in Can Can they had a special wagon to take the costumes... I think they were all hanging... I don't think they went into baskets.

SB: Really?

GA: I had my own basket too... for my own clothes, because they used to move your costumes as well.

SB: Oh, did they? And so, what would you do... pack it in the theatre?

GA: In the theatre, yes.

SB: And then they...?

GA: Kept it in the theatre.

SB: Gosh. And who was in Can Can?

GA: Sally Rogers was the star and Freddie... Freddie... I can't think of his name now... [Freddie Sales].

SB: Oh, I'll find out. And what year was that?

GA: It would have been ... '54 was Zip Goes A Million, '55 was Catlin's Summer Season so I started Can Can in '55 and it went right through to the end of 1956.

SB: Oh, right. What about after that?

GA: Following that I went to Dublin in *The Adventures of David Crockett*, which starred Hermione Baddeley and Leslie Henson – it was not a success. They thought it was going to be a musical that would come into the West End but I think that was a bit of a dream. [Laughs]

SB: Was it?

GA: It was not good.

SB: And you were saying earlier about...

GA: Oh, I must tell you... In *The Adventures of David Crockett* my dancing partner – there were four boys, four girls – and my dancing partner was Jill Gascoigne!

SB: Really?

GA: Who went on to do *The Gentle Touch* [television drama].

SB: And toured with my husband actually too... And so you were saying in Dublin... about them not being successful...

GA: No.

SB: What happened? Did they throw things?

GA: Yes, they did. We got chocolates thrown at us.... And not boxes [?] either..... They were the hard caramels. Yes. [Both laugh].

SB: So, that finished earlier than expected, did it?

GA: Yes. Yes, we just ran for three weeks.

SB: So, how did you come to end up in Portugal?

GA: By that time I had started - what they call on the Continent - as a Ballet – I had girls working for me. Six girls and my partner, Adolph... so we were eight people. We had our own non-stop show. A unit.

SB: Yes.

GA: And we came down to open the new casino in Vilamoura and we'd only been here two weeks and we were in there rehearsing one morning and the Director walked in and said, 'There's no show tonight', and we said, 'Oh? Why?' and he said, 'We've had a revolution!' [Both laugh]

SB: Oh, my goodness!

GA: In fact that's what we thought. But we didn't see anything of the revolution and we continued working but of course there were no tourists that year. So he said – working our two-month contract and I think we stayed for ten months. And every year we keep coming back to work in the casinos and by that time there was a casino in Monte Gordo. There was one in Vilamoura and one in Huelva so we used to work maybe three or four months in each one.

SB: Oh, gosh!

GA: So, because we kept coming back here we bought property here and that's how we come to be here now.

SB: How fantastic. And before that when you were still in England – going back a bit – when did you first get a group together? What made you think that was the way to go?

GA: Well, I had an act with a girl first of all.

SB: Tell me about that.

GA: Shall I repeat the whole story?

SB: Yes.

GA: Well, we slid into this act by chance. We were employed by Roger Stephanie who was the Can Can dancer in the Folies Bergere . I was employed to be male Can Can soloist and there were four girls, one being an English girl - the other three were French - and somewhere along the line, Roger Stephanie backed out of the job and the three French girls backed out, leaving only - Fudge, her name was, her nickname – and myself and Roger said, 'Well, if you want to do the job, you can do it', so we formed an act. Quite by chance.

SB: Oh.

GA: Which we did for two years and we travelled all over the continent.

SB: Mmm. What did you call yourselves?

GA: Atkins and Brandon.

SB: Oh, right.

GA: Mainly because the agent said, 'What are you going to call yourselves?' And she suggested the name. She said, 'Well, they'll call you Mr. Atkins and you Miss Brandon, so you'll have respect!'. [Both laugh] Anyway, we worked for two years. I guess I was a little more ambitious, so after two years I stopped doing the act and came back to London, not knowing quite what I was going to do and I finished by working in the Panama Club in Great Windmill Street. And I had four girls there and I had to change the programme, so then I found I had to do choreography, I had to provide the costumes, I had to sing in the show and suddenly I had a small show.

SB: Mmm.

GA: So, that was really the beginning of having a show. And I did that for about two or three months and then suddenly I had a chance to with the Folies Bergère to New York. So I went back to the Folies Bergère and gave up the show.

SB: Mmm.

GA: And I went off to...

SB: Where in New York did you work?

GA: The Broadway Theatre, on Broadway.

SB: Oh wow!

GA: So I was there for nine months with the... And from there I went to Australia to go with the show from the Windmill. Windmill Revue.

SB: Now, tell me about that show.

GA: Choreographed by Billy Petch so it was more like a mini Folies Bergere but it was a very good show so I was in Australia for a year.

SB: And did that tour Australia or...

GA: No, unfortunately, it didn't. I thought we were going to go to Australia, New Zealand but it didn't work out.

SB: But you were in Sydney were you? Most of the time?

GA: In Sydney. We did a season in Sydney and then a season in Melbourne.

SB: And is that where you worked with Bobby Dennis?

GA: Not quite. The show closed. The Windmill closed and the Tivoli Theatre Circuit wanted to do a new show so I stayed on and Bobby Dennis came out [from England] to do this new show. Actually I think he came out and did the end of the Windmill Revue II. So, we were all engaged for this new show to be called, One Damn Thing After Another and low and behold the Tivoli Theatre Circuit closed and we only worked for two weeks and the notice went up and the whole circuit closed.

SB: Oh, so that's when the Tivoli Circuit closed. Oh, gosh. So you ended up back in England?

GA: Back in England. [both laugh] And that's when I went to the Palace Theatre in Westcliff and worked as Resident Choreographer.

SB: And did you enjoy that ?

GA: Oh, and between that I did the act again with Fudge.

SB: Oh, yes?

GA: And we went to Scotland and we worked in the Andy Stewart show.

SB: Oh, did you? Where?

GA: Dundee and Aberdeen as guest attraction.

SB: Yes.

GA: And that was like a week or two week engagement.

SB: Oh, yes.

GA: Oh, and then I worked in the Savoy [Hotel]: they did a French show, so I worked there in French Dressing for two weeks... Or two months.

SB: So, were you kind of known as a French... Male Can Can

GA: Can Can. Yes. Well, I originally did the French Can Can soloist when the Folies Bergère came to London. That was after working at the Victoria Palace.

SB: Oh, right.

GA: They brought the Folies Bergere from Paris to the Winter Garden Theatre in Drury Lane so it was the genuine, genuine article.

SB: Yes.

GA: And I knew they needed a Can Can boy and having seen the Folies Bergère in Paris when I was on holiday, I thought, 'I can do that!'. [Both laugh] So I practiced very hard at the splits and tricks that one does in the Can Can and I went along and auditioned and lo and behold there I was... a Can Can soloist. So, from that point on I always - more or less always - did the Can Can.

SB: So, did you... The Folies Bergère at the Winter Gardens... did it continue? I mean, did you go anywhere else with it?

GA: Yes. When it finished in London it went on a European tour. I didn't go with it immediately because I went into the Shirley Bassey show at the Prince of Wales Theatre, Blue Magic.

SB: Oh, did you?

GA: So, I went there but I had this itch always to go back to do the Can Can. So, I left the Blue Magic and joined the Folies Bergère when they were in Vienna. So I was in Vienna for a season with them. And then we did a season – a small tour – of Belgium,

having all signed contracts to go to South America, which were never confirmed so we did this terrible tour in Belgium, working in mining towns - Charleroi, Liege... We did get to Brussels for a week and then that closed. So then I thought, 'I can't go back to London now, after telling everybody, "I'm going off to South America"!' so I went off to Paris and I went to the Direction there, to the Folies Bergère and said, 'Can you give me a job'. So, I went and worked there for nine months.

SB: Oh, you did.

GA: Yes.

SB: Oh, how wonderful.

GA: It was – what an experience! I mean, the Folies Bergère, there's no theatre like it.

SB: No.

GA: I mean, the way it's run.

SB: And when were you in Paris in the Folies Bergère?

GA: 1960

SB: Ah, that was a good time.

GA: 1960/1961. But it was the last... the end of an era.

SB: Mmm.

GA: Because Billy Petch went in and did the next Folies Bergère and it was all modernised.

SB: Was it?

GA: It changed a lot.

SB: Mmm.

GA: Yes.

SB: So, you never thought of staying in Paris?

GA: I did. I did. In fact, I had the chance to continue in the Folies Bergère but I couldn't make up my mind so I went back to London and then I hung around in London and I thought, 'No, this isn't me' so I packed my bags, put them on the back of my scooter and went off to Paris and did odd jobs there. I worked in the Olympia Theatre in Paris twice. Once with Jacques Tatti in a show...

SB: Oh!

GA: They built a show round one of his films so it was a film and live show and then the other time was with Johnny Halliday who became France's biggest star.

SB: Yes.

GA: And then, of course, I started doing the act with Fudge.

SB: Oh. And so, when did you kind of give it all up?

GA: I did my last Can Can at the age of fifty two. Looking back... maybe I should have stopped a little earlier! [Both laugh], but one keeps going as long as possible.

SB: Mmm. So, were you getting aches and pains or were you just....?

GA: Well, I found – at the age of 52 – looking back... I realised that I didn't have the speed and that is what was the essence of the Can Can - was the speed.

SB: Mmm.

GA: And you gradually start to cut corners to continue working – well, you've seen the YouTube?

SB: Yes.

GA: It's still pretty good.

SB: Oh, yes.

GA: For the age of 52!

SB: It's fantastic. Anyway, it's been a pleasure talking to you and what a beautiful place to live and retire...

GA: Yes.

SB: But you haven't retired, have you?

GA: Retired. Still working - Bed and Breakfast.

SB: Yes. Anyway, thank you very much.