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## Michael Worsley – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Sue Barbour**

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Son of Arthur Worsley and Audrey Hewitt. Animal Acts; digs; dressing rooms; Jimmy Gaye; Frank Ifield; Alan King; musicians; Bob Newman; Sunday Concerts; Sunday Night at the London Palladium; television; Vogelbein's Bears; working practices; Arthur Worsley.

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SB: This is Sue Barbour interviewing Michael Worsley, son of Arthur Worsley and Audrey Hewitt, and first of all, Michael, I would like you to confirm that you are in agreement with this recording being lodged with the British Library Theatre Project and for access for future generations to learn about Variety Theatre?

MW: I'm perfectly in agreement with you, Susan, and if I could just add... please don't hit me again! [both laugh]

SB: First of all, let me know... I'd like to know where you were born and how you came to be involved with show business?

MW: Ooh... Well, I was born, let's see, right here in Blackpool - a long time after you [both laugh] - in a private nursing home and from then on it was a case of... I'd either be at school or not and then every summer, much like yourself - well actually more than every summer - every school holidays meant going to wherever our Mum and Dad were, didn't it?

SB: Mmm, it did really. So before you went to school, did you travel with your Dad? I mean... You can't remember?

MW: It's a bit hard - it's a bit far back but I think so.

SB: When do you think you were first aware of the fact that your Dad did something different? Or wasn't it different to you - show business? I mean - did you know that not everybody's Dads did the same thing?

MW: I've always thought that people in show business were doing a job.

SB: Right.

MW: It was always people going to work. I'm sorry if other people... it seems like they should be like 'artists suffering for their work' but really, all in all, it was people doing, what seemed to me a very hard job under difficult circumstances. Such as... if you take my own father, for instance: he had a house here in Blackpool to keep, he had a house in Manchester with his mother to keep - his original home. He had me away at school - that's the equivalent of another house to keep - at boarding school and he had himself in hotels to keep. So really he was keeping four livelihoods - four houses going you know - whereas most people only have one, so people who think, 'Oh, you just go on and work for twenty minutes a night', I'm afraid, are rather removed from the actual truth.

SB: Mmm.Yes.

MW: It's a hard life - and an expensive life as well, so I think people used to be well recompensed for doing it but now that I think an ordinary wage such as that earned by 'the public' is maybe a lot closer to a theatrical wage than it used to be - and I can't remember what the question was!

SB: [Laughs] You answered actually - exactly what I wanted to know - whether your Dad kept more than one home, because like you say... I mean, some people toured all the time and so they didn't have a permanent base, but obviously when you have children involved and everything you do tend to have to have somewhere else.

MW: Well, sooner or later everyone's got to put down roots.

SB: Mmm

MW: All the Speciality Acts that I can remember - like the Italian and Spanish juggling acts were - all seemed to be saving up to buy a restaurant in Streatham. Now, whether they all did it or not, I'm not sure but that seemed to be the goal, you know. They knew it was going to be a short life, like a footballer, and so they saved like mad and that was the target - that they were working towards. They weren't working just towards trying to be famous or stardom which you see now, people on the television really not trying to learn the craft just trying to be famous for doing something which... they're not willing to learn how to do it properly and that was never the case.

SB: No. Did you ever have any thoughts about going into the business yourself?

MW: Do you mean 'on' [stage].

SB: Yes.

MW: Oh. If I was thirty years younger I'd have said 'definitely' because television's awash with people who can't do anything – so I think that would have suited me down... [both laugh] Just going on and saying, 'Please welcome and...' I can't imagine anything less talented.

SB: So did you... what... you thought you weren't talented enough? Or did you not sing and dance and play the spoons?

MW: I think I would have been far too... no, I wouldn't have been too shy to go on. I'm certainly too shy to get up and dance at a party. I'd rather tap dance at the London Palladium than get up at a party, I really would! And it was a long time before I found out that most professional dancers also feel like that. Look at all the chorus troupes you've known, the John Tiller troupe and the Pam Devis dancers who'd be wailing and crying at the end of the summer season that it was all breaking up but when you saw them at a party they were the worst dancers you'd ever seen [both laugh] in your life.

SB: Yes. So tell me – where did you go to school?

MW: I went locally and then I went to a school called Rossall which is up in Fleetwood, not far from here, probably because that was the closest boarding school to go to. The reason I was sent to a boarding school was really... 1) because I wanted to go and my father was away all the time, you know, I mean, he was really only at home if something had gone wrong, it was a mistake, so when I went to school on a daily basis I always left by the same gate to go to the same bus stop because when I opened the gate he might be there waiting in the car. Might be... probably wouldn't be but might be. That might be because he was doing a split week, he got a television and so he'd got part of the week at home.

SB: Did you miss him when he was away?

MW: Well, no, not really... because - I can't understand that. I don't understand people, actors and what have you, going on tour or going on... say at the moment, they're in the television show in Australia and they're crying and missing their families. You know, you can't be on the stage and want to be at home. You can't be a shepherd and live in a flat in Park Lane [SB laughs] you can't – you know, the two things don't go together.

SB: No.

MW: You can't want to be at home in Rotherham and - in the centre of the country and work on a North Sea gas rig – it's the same thing isn't it? Don't you think so?

SB: Oh yes.

MW: So I don't understand when they say, 'I've been too long away from home. I've got to get home and I'm missing...' - they're doing nothing of the sort. How many have you known who say, 'Well, I went over to America and... but I'm afraid I missed fish and chips and rice pudding and I missed the British way of life and I missed the weather' and you know that if they'd got a contract in Hollywood, this place and their family wouldn't have seen them for dust! [both laugh] Wait for the postcards.

SB: Right. So tell me when you were at school, were the other children aware of what your Dad did for a living?

MW: Very. Very. Yes. Most people were complimentary. They didn't... There was one who said...what did he say? [pause] He said, 'It's all very well' he said, 'but, my father works!' and I said, 'Oh yes?' - I'm like ten years old at the time... I was eleven, I was eleven years old and I said, 'Well, my father works'. 'Oh no' he said, 'your father works for twenty five minutes a day! My father works for 40 hours a week'. I said, 'Well, how do you work that out?'. He said, 'Oh, they went and saw the show last Thursday and he timed him and he only works for 25 minutes!'. [both laugh]

SB: So did you say...

MW: No account of the half a million miles a year travelling and the God knows what else – Sorry I interrupted you.

SB: No. I was going to say 'Did you say... let him know that he was wrong?'.  
[pause]

MW: Well, no, I just came home and we all had a good laugh about it.

SB: Yes.

MB: It is funny, isn't it?

SB: It is, yes.

MW: It is.

SB: So they were quite happy – I mean they liked the fact, did they, that your Dad did that? That he was a known personality?

MW: See, at that time there was a programme on called Sunday Night at the London Palladium and everybody in the country watched it. Literally everybody. So not only the school children and their parents but the school masters and everybody, and he was on it quite a lot. In fact he was turning television shows down at one point because he said, you know, 'I'm getting used up'. Like, at the moment you can see people making the same mistake. One girl, in particular, she's doing magazine stuff. She's doing - every hosting thing on television and you know very well that sooner or later, it's all going to burn out because that's the way it always, always happens. Now, perhaps they are right and their agent is taking it while it is there. Good luck to her but on the other hand, if she wants a career lasting any more than into the middle of next year, you know, she would be wise to back-pedal because all the evidence is there that that is what they do. They use you up and spit you out.

SB: Mmm. So do you think that... that's the - in the days of Variety because you were touring all the time and your act was fresh in every place you went to, you had a much longer career than you... than in television where you are exposed...

MW: Well, I know that as far as my own father was concerned he never did his stage act on television because he said, 'Well, you know, that's it! – if they see that!' He used bits of it, but on top of that he had scriptwriters in London writing 'topicals' for him to go on and use for once and then never again and then that's the way it is. Yes, you can't go on and just – well, you can go on once and do it but you can't go on - what would you say, twenty times a year? - and do it or you'd have to be 'magic'. Mind you, having said that, there was a comedian called Alan King, in America and he came over here – he looked like Al Capone, he worked with a cigar, very sort of gruff New York type and he came over here with Judy Garland on her first tour and Arthur knew him from being in America you know and hanging out at Jilly's Bar or wherever and he told him that all the young go-getting comedians in England at the time, had been in [the theatre] with notebooks, with ball point pens, with microphones, with heaven knows what, getting all his material down, which they were probably going to use for the next twenty years but they were all knocking off his act and Alan King said, 'Well' he said. He shrugged. He says, 'Well, I suppose I'll have to write more'. And that's all it meant to him really. He just shrugged it off and probably by the next evening he probably had a new act. So that's the other side of the coin.

SB: Yes. So if you've got the talent to write the stuff or to get writers in... then that's the way to go.

MW: Or if you want to just parasite off others.

SB: Exactly.

MW: I remember being told that there were comedy writing teams here that had started off picking up American radio on the short wave radio so they could pick up all the American shows - you know the Bing Crosby and the Tommy Dorsey shows - and write down the gags to sell at Lime Grove the next day, and then when television started - here, independent television started in '55 - what they'd do is one would be here, the other one go to America and they would phone it through. That's how they did it and those were famous names here, famous names who went on to great success... that's how they started.

SB: Really?

MW: Yes. It's robbery, isn't it? It's robbery.

SB: It is. Yes.

MW: Of course it is.

SB: So when you went to see your father in the holidays, where did you stay? What kind of accommodation did you have?

MW: I think it depended on the town. Usually it was... From what I remember it was hotels, but occasionally it was in the most marvellous theatrical digs. I remember there was a wonderful one in Coventry... Mrs. Coombes. I can remember that quite clearly.

SB: What was that like?

MW: Well, when there were theatre digs they were far better than a hotel because breakfast, as you know, could be any time up to.... I don't know! [both laugh] And so I remember that. Did you ever stay there?

SB: I think so.

MW: That was the one with the one-eyed parrot and she used to give it - it used to eat off a spoon. She used to give it a spoon, like a big teaspoon and it used to hold it and have its dinner like that, usually rice pudding. He liked a spoonful of rice pudding [SB laughs] so I remember that, and I remember there was one in Leeds which everybody clamoured to stay at. That was - now, what was her name? What the heck was her name? This is called a stage wait isn't it?

SB: I am trying to think, because eventually there was Basil and his mother...

MW: Oh. No. It was a big beautiful stone house in Roundhay in Leeds and she'd had all the basement and the cellars all made into rooms, she'd had the garage made into like a Swiss Chalet. What nobody seemed to know - only the ones who were regulars there knew - was that although there was a cellar, ground floor, first floor, second floor and then attic, that she was actually running girls in the attic. [both laugh]

SB: Oh really?

MW: ...during the day and I wondered what those policeman were that kept coming. A knock on the door and it was usually a policeman. 'Why are policemen always here?' and of course that was: one to go up into the attic and two to get paid off by... what on earth is her name? Well, anyway she'd got a string of convictions going back to when the Americans were - in the war...

SB: Really?

MW: Yes in the war and anyway, God bless her, so that was a... it was a proper mansion and she wouldn't tell anybody what the charges were for the week. All she would say at the end was, 'Well - give me what you think'.

SB: Really?

MW: Yes. So she really wanted the company and she was stage-struck and she also wanted a front to the more profitable business going on under the eaves! [both laugh]

SB: Well, well, well!

MW: Anyway, one day one of the girls came down - she must have had a cancellation! - and she came into the back room where a few of us were sitting and all of a sudden she said to me, she said, 'You're Michael?'. I said, 'Yes'. She said, 'You go to Rossall?'. I said, 'Yes love, yes, what made you ask that?' and she said, 'My younger brother goes to Rossall' and she told me his name and he was this quite tall, slim, very quiet boy and the penny dropped as to just what was going on, because I knew that he was excused games because he wasn't very well and he'd actually got a hole in the heart - I don't think it was life-threatening, but instead of... I think they were Yorkshire people and instead of going to like a rough round-the-corner school, what she'd done was to put herself on the game to pay to send him to the equivalent of... well, the Lancashire Eton, so that's a bit sad isn't it?

SB: Yes it is. Yes.

MW: In a way... anyway, that's what she was doing. Nice women.

SB: And how old were you at the time?

MW: Fourteen or fifteen I think. Just old enough to figure out, 'Now hang on a second...'.

SB: Yes. Oh dear. So you enjoyed going where your Dad was, did you? Did you make friends with any other children in theatre?

MW: There weren't that many... Well, there was you!

SB: Yes.

MW: There was Darly's Dogs. There's a funny thing.

SB: What?

MW: You turn the television on and there's two different series going on about animals do the funniest things. Everybody's screaming and laughing at dogs doing this, doing that and yet, if you had an act like Darly's Dogs now, there would be people protesting outside and the Council trying to close the theatre down because the dogs are being humiliated. It 's all right to turn the television on and see - as I did the other day - a bulldog who's taught himself to skateboard - this is in Venice in Los Angeles. So he's a famous sight there and he runs along pushing his skateboard and then jumps on and steers himself about – right? You can do that, but if you did that now on a stage you'd probably not be granted a license would you?

SB: No. It's true.

MW: Do you understand that? I don't.

SB: No, I don't understand it.

MW: I don't get that at all. I don't understand why nobody ever says that. Well, I mean we know about circus acts. About it being very, very cruel and humiliating for the lions, the tigers, the bears and whatever to go and perform twice a day at the circus but we know that those animals are interested and well-cared for.

SB: Mmm.

MW: To close the circuses down as they have done, virtually, here and put those animals in zoos is about the cruellest thing they could have done.

SB: Mmm.

MW: Because what we know is that when you go in a zoo and see a polar bear, for instance, pacing from one end of the pit to the other and throwing themselves up the wall and then back and swinging their head round and coming back, that's actually because they're being driven insane by being kept in captivity and bored. Well, there's one called Pipaluk, a famous one who's been kept at London Zoo since a tiny baby and now he's a certified maniac in the zoo. Now, if he was in the circus – I've yet to meet the animal trainer who would get in a cage with twelve demonic lions, driven mad by captivity. They're all completely *compos mentis*.

SB: Oh yes.

MW: ... and perfectly all right compared to zoo animals. So who's going to listen to us?

SB: No and they're almost like family pets, aren't they? I mean, part of the family with a circus.

MW: Nobody... I mean, you know, nobody's going to go in a... nobody's going to get a lion fresh out of the jungle - or for that matter his son - to go and perform circus tricks in a cage. You've got to go through two generations before you'd even attempt anything like that, and once you have gone through two generations you can't then take that animal and release him back into the wild because it's the next nearest thing to a pussy cat.

SB: Do you remember any of the other animal acts in *Variety*?

MW: Yes. I remember Bob, what was his name? I think it was Bob Newman.

SB: Yes, that's right. Yes.

MW: I saw him in Blackpool a couple of times and all he had was a Labrador. I think he was Canadian and how he got the dog into the country I don't know because of the quarantine laws but it seems that as long as he had it in the Opera House and he didn't take it in the street, he had some sort of license where he had to exercise the dog on the roof and then he used to – whatever he asked the dog to do, the dog did the opposite! So when he asked it to go through a hoop or something he would lie on the floor and went to sleep. The best one was an act from Manchester, a little man called Gene Detroy - Detroy with a 'y' on the end - and the Marquis Family and.... the first chimps on the television were - in the adverts - you know.

SW: Oh, PG Tips or.....?

MW.: The first ones before the Robert Brother's ones were Gene Detroy's, and do you remember the chimp who used to look through a little hole in the stage and he was told that the girls dressed below and he...

SB: Oh yes!

MW: Yes and all through the act the chimp used to be getting up - and he had about six of them - going for another look through the hole!. But he was a comedian really. He was a Lancashire comedian really, with chimps in the act. What other acts do you remember?

SB: There was Vogelbein's B...

MW: I remember Vogelbein's Bears

SB: Yes.

MW: Something happened outside a theatre. I think, Birmingham, where two lads were waiting for the dancers to come out. What they didn't know, when they got round the girls, was that Mr. Hans Vogelbein was on top of his van making the ropes secure with all the bears inside and one of the girls screamed and Hans jumped down, got hold of the ring leader by the back of his shirt collar and the belt of his trousers, picked him up and used him a bit like - you know those battery rams for police?

SB: Yes.

MW: and he swung him into the side of the truck because he was used to picking up... you know... 30 stone bears - it meant nothing to him - So he got rid of the bears because they were getting a bit too much for him and bought a chimp called Gilbert. Now, Gilbert lived in the caravan with him and Mrs. Vogelbein - Do you know this story?

SB: No.

MW: Well, he used to sit in the corner with like a Tattersall check suit on... this is Gilbert...

SB: Mmm.

MW: And he liked to smoke a cigarette or a... one of those little Whiff cigars so they'd light one of those for him and he'd sit there with it between his fingers, puffing on his cheroot and looking out of the window for girls so when he saw one pass the caravan, he'd, 'ogh, ogh ogh' [Gorilla noise] out of the window at her and because he didn't know quite that he was a chimp you see. [SB laughs] This is the point of the story. But the problems came when – and he's a big chimp. A whacking big... probably still alive - and the problem came where there were say a few girl dancers in the show and when one of the girls of course – when it was - whatever time of the month it was – whichever girl it was, was on, had to be kept out of the way of Gilbert because Gilbert knew...

SB: Oh no! [Laughs]

MW: Yes. It's a... I thought about this sometimes and tried to teach myself! [both laugh]

SB: Oh dear!

MW: And there was one story where he'd got loose and chased the girl up into the gods and she just managed to get the dressing room door shut and locked before Gilbert battered it down. No he didn't, no I've got that wrong. He had... She shut the door but he had the palm of his hand on the door and he could see her through the crack in the door and he's staring her out and she's got the chair or something in the door trying to keep it shut and you know those... you get them in all types of buildings... it's like – a light bulb and you know... when the cable comes up like a pipe?

SB: Oh yes.

MW: and the light bulb is on the wall and it's got a glass over it, like... the supposedly unbreakable glass on it. Gilbert's got the door... holding the door with one hand and then got hold of... took the glass off this light bulb and then took the light bulb out and stuck his finger in the socket and that's... I think it was some time in the next day before they could get Gilbert down out of the rafters of the... [both laugh] He'd disappeared up the ropes, up the hemp and it was sometime the next day before they could do the act because Gilbert was still up there...

SB: Oh no!

MW: Yes. Well, they had to find a way of keeping Gilbert calm... so that particular job fell to Mrs. Vogelbein. [both laugh]

SB: Oh dear.

MW: And from then on she had to undo Gilbert's trousers for him and calm him down!  
[both laugh]

SB: Is that true?

MW: Yes.

SB: Oh my...

MW: I hope she washed her hands before she made the sandwiches! that's... [both laugh] Yes, that's true.

SB: So what other acts do you remember? [Still laughing]

MW: Let's see. What else. Oh I don't know. I need prompting here.

SB: Who did your Dad work with that you were very impressed with? Or not?

MW: I remember things like the very disgruntled musicians. They always said 'steer clear of a trumpeter with a...who's got a silver trumpet. They'll be... You'll have a problem with the Union and what the musicians, some of them, the younger ones, had a bit of a problem with was that they'd be there in the pit or on stage accompanying someone in the company on stage they knew couldn't play and they'd be saying, 'Look, I'm here earning £70 per week and I can play anything and I can read anything they put in front of me, and that clown can just about manage three chords with the help of chalk marks so why am I earning £70 per week and he's earning £400?', and that was... that bone of contention, I can remember that quite strongly until pay-day arrived and they got drunk... so... but that between a musician doing a job and an artiste going on to entertain. They are two entirely different things, otherwise there would be no pop artists, would there, in the top twenty unless they'd been to the Royal College of Music.

SB: Mmm, true.

MW: And who'd buy that? So show business is always going to be a façade don't you think?

SB: Mmm, I do.

MW: and those who can do least earn most. There's always - there's no point in getting jealous because I heard Orson Welles say this - about actors - how they'd say, 'Oh, he's the greatest actor on film' and, 'he's the greatest actor on stage' but neither of them will

ever earn the money that... I'm not mentioning any names but he earns £25 million a film. None of them will ever earn that sort of money and Orson Welles said, 'What you've got to understand is: there's always a strata of milk above the cream' and it's true.

SB: Mmm.

MW: So true.

SB: Mmm. But if you think that on Moss Empire dates and everything that there was... always obviously a Top of the Bill, did you ever notice or did your Dad ever say that there... I mean did they all get on well together? Or was there any kind of animosity between them or...?

MW: I can't remember, but I've been told about things. I've been told that there was a singer called Donald Peers who'd gone round for ever and a day and an American publicist came over and had a bet that just through publicity and everything he could make somebody a Star so they said 'Well, Donald Peers has been round for thirty years, you couldn't do it with him' and he did. He made him the biggest name in the country and Donald Peers - who you'd think would have known better - got a bit of an inflated head and decided that he needed one dressing room to get ready in, one dressing room to receive guests in and another to use as an office. So he wanted the biggest three dressing rooms all to himself and treated the rest of the bill accordingly. Well, then business sort of slacked off, like it does, and he just went back to normal, like he'd always been, because he was just basically a nice fella. He was a very nice man but adulation is something that most people would have difficulty containing. I don't know how nineteen year old footballers earning a thousand pounds a week, how they stay - how they actually turn up on a Saturday surprises me, how they've not wrapped themselves round a bridge on the M1.

SB: Mmm, yes.

MW: But - now what was the name of the act? - Arthur started doing Sunday Concerts at Butlin's because... Well, this goes to show how hard people used to work, because in the summer, Monday to Saturday, twice a night. Sometimes in summer seasons there would be a matinée - but I don't remember that happening too much for some reason - and he was a bit envious of, on a Sunday, some people going across the country on a Sunday morning - this was after a week's work - to get to say from Yarmouth to Bournemouth or whatever, in time for a two o'clock rehearsal - band call - doing another two shows there and then travelling back the next day in time for the Monday first house. Well, he couldn't do that and your Mum and Dad couldn't do that either because they were working with what they called 'properties' and where you could sing or tell jokes, you couldn't use a doll or puppet or dance, you know, that was countrywide, it was the law.

SB: The law, yes.

MW: The same from Council to Council. That was the law. You couldn't do it. For some reason, you couldn't use a dummy or a puppet, you could use a saxophone or a violin or a piano, drums, bongos anyway... because Butlin's was private land, when they started doing concerts of course... and [he] realised that you could go and do a Sunday Concert. So that's how he started doing them and didn't realise that in Pwllheli with two theatres, either side of a bridge... I can't remember if... you might remember. Was it three shows or was it? Or four?

SB: Yes. Three. Was it?

MW: At one point, I think it was four. So they'd stagger it by an hour, three quarters of an hour and put you on that little train thing, do you remember? And take you to the second theatre where the show had already started and then back to the first theatre where the second show had already started. So, you were doubling twice. I've seen him with his head up against the porcelain basin to try and cool down.

SB: Really?

MW: Yes. I've seen all that.

SB: They were hard work.

MW: Yes. But I've also seen, in cases like that when you'd usually know what dressing room you'd... like Number 1 dressing room would be kept for you to go into. One day, a dear man called Wyn Calvin was at one of the camps in the summer show and he left Arthur a note to say, 'Don't go in that dressing room, you should come in mine'. Right? So, he'd got a pot of tea, jug of milk, he'd laid it out really nice for when Arthur arrived and... to one of the two other acts on the bill, Arthur said, 'Go in that, I'm in this. Use that one there'. Well, we could hear them in there [Number 1] 'Well, look at this, Number 1!' and they came out and when they came passed in the corridor they wouldn't speak to us! [both laugh] They wouldn't look at us, they were all too... they were looking at somebody else down the end. Isn't that funny?

SB: Mmm.

MW: It took five minutes, that! Five minutes for their head to blow up.

SB: Yes. Do you remember, talking about that...

MW: Some people stay like that permanently!

SB: But there was a... the dressing room list seemed to be really important, didn't it, in those days? I mean, like Moss Empire dates when you arrived on the Monday people seemed to go and look at the dressing room list... I mean, I know you needed to unpack and everything...

MW: And see where they were?

SB: Yes.

MW: Well, that's a sort of pecking order, isn't it?

SB: Yes.

MW: But why, I mean why? You know, it's not like that with other people, is it? If I had six workmen come to this house tomorrow morning and one was a plumber and the other an electrician they wouldn't be sort of vying for... each one does a separate job. I mean, a singer can't do a juggler's job, a juggler can't do the drummer's job, you know? I mean, I've never understood any of that sort of hierarchy which unfortunately did permeate a lot of bills. Especially Variety I think. Maybe it goes on in Legitimate Theatre as well. In fact, come to think of it, it probably does, yes. Must do, mustn't it?

SB: Yes.

MW: But why? Why? I mean, after all you know... they're all taxi drivers aren't they? Just different cars!

SB: Yes. I would have thought it would have been good if acts with a lot of props went nearer the stage. You know, like to be close because it seemed to be like the Top of the Bill was usually a comic or singer.

MW: Certainly, in pantomime they see sense. The Dame gets the biggest dressing room.

SB: Exactly.

MW: The biggest because of all the costume changes. That's the only time any sort of common sense seems to arrive.

SB: Yes. Do you think it was the perks of the job... almost? You know... the dressing room bit...?

MW: Yes. Yes, maybe but on the other hand, you know what happens in offices if you want to keep your secretary and she's due for a rise and knows it. What you can do is to make her your personal assistant and then she'll forget all about the rise. True?

SB: Yes.

MW: So maybe it's the same in theatre. You can placate people, you can avoid a problem, by putting someone in a bigger dressing room, you can. You can. Before they find out that, 'She's getting a hundred pound a week more than I am', you can avoid that 'by giving me a bigger dressing room then I'll be happy'. True? It's true, it's so true. I'm sure there are people who'd take a cut, if they could go in a Number 1 or Number 2 dressing room. I think they'd work for less money.

SB: Yes. I think that's probably true.

MW: I think they would and... I think they're completely out of their minds! [both laugh]

SB: And what about the sort of ... running order of the bill?

MW: Well, there was always going to be a second spot comic, wasn't there?

SB: Mmm.

MW: I don't think there was any way around that, really.

SB: But do you remember whether it was usually young comics? Sort of, on their way up. Or older comics on their way down?

MW: Yes, maybe that as well. The best comic I ever saw – I was about 11 years old and it was Brighton Hippodrome and there was a young hot new singer with a record in the charts and he was called Frank Ifield, from Australia and it was his first week of actually... on a bill. He'd never... he was number one but it was his first week... in this lovely theatre and I remember sitting in the audience with my Mum and watching the second spot, this man – and I thought 'what's this coming on?' – and he was dressed... he wasn't in a tuxedo or bow tie, he was dressed in a grey suit – a grey lounge suit – an ordinary shirt and grey tie and a grey trilby and he was holding an unlit cigarette and the band played [MW sings, 'da da da da' etc.] the music stopped and he said 'Yes, have you?' [Both laugh] and sometimes – because I watched him every night – he'd say 'No, thank God... have you?'. Now the problem is... the people listening to this won't know the words, will they? They'll know the tune but they won't know the words, will they?

SB: No.

MW: So, shall I tell you?

SB: Yes.

MW: It's "Have you ever caught your bollocks in a rat-trap?" [both laugh] 'Yes. Have you?', he says and they all scream laughing and what he did was... he lit the cigarette and night after night, I'd watch him and think – how can anybody smoke a cigarette non-stop and there are clouds of smoke and it lasts his entire act! He used to flick ash all over the - you know, where the riser comes out of the...

SB: Yes

MW: ... and there was a pile of ash there and I used to think... 'how long does a cigarette last, you know?' Well, I've never timed it, have you?

SB: No.

MW: How long does it last? I don't know but I'd have thought about four minutes but not twelve! So he must have been packing it really tight with pipe tobacco or something. I don't know what he was doing but anyway he was a very, very funny man and that was the first time that I saw anybody actually not do a straightforward... like a comic do a straightforward second spot. He was doing sort of... not just jokes, he was doing this sort of banter with the audience and his name was Jimmy Gaye from Liverpool. You never saw him?

SB: No.

MW: No? Well, he was absolutely marvellous.

SB: Really?

MW: But that was the first sort of what would go on with another comic from Ireland called Harry Bailey who had... I hope he was a bit resentful, because all of the club comics more or less knocked his act off. He was the first of the Irish... you know, that kind of comic and Jimmy Gaye was the first of the sort of radio comedians that I saw on the stage and so they both made a very big impact, compared to the usual...

SB: So do you know what happened to Jimmy Gaye after that?

MW: Well, I should think he probably smoked himself to death! Don't you?

SB: [laughs] Yes.

MW: I used to hear him sometimes on Worker's Playtime from time to time, so when the BBC finally gets round to - as they said two Director General's back - they were going to put everything online, hopefully we'll be able to hear him then because it's all there. It's all there.

SB: Mmm. So, your Dad did a lot of T.V. didn't he? What period was that that he did a lot of T.V.?

MW: He... I don't know if he started... I think when Henry Hall went on television with the BBC in about 1949.

SB: Oh right.

MW: I'm guessing that's about the first he did. But at that time, you know it was all very intermittent because... I don't even know how long television was on for a night. Was it on for about two hours a night or something?

SB: I don't know. I presume so. Yes, I can't really rem...

MW: Not much more. ITV started in 1955 and from then on it was pretty regular up to... well, for about twenty years. Yes, about twenty years.

SB: Mmm. Gosh.

MW: With mainly the BBC, BBC Scotland, Scottish TV, not so much Granada, I don't think. Granada didn't really do Variety Shows. Variety shows were mainly handled by ABC in Didsbury in Manchester, with shows like Saturday Bandbox, Variety Bandbox and ATV who were in Birmingham and also at Boreham Wood. At the studios there that are now the BBC studios.

SB: Yes.

MW: And also Rediffusion who I think were at Kingsway, were they?

SB: Yes, I think they were.

MW: They were somewhere there... and then - I think Rediffusion did more Situation Comedy shows than Variety Shows.

SB: So tell me how you got... Because you did go into some form of the Industry didn't you? So tell me about that.

MW: Well, sort of. [both laugh] I went into a Variety Agency.

SB: And what was that called?

MW: That was called Cavanagh's. But it was at the time...

SB: Was that straight from school?

MW: More or less. Yes. I mean I loved it there but the problem really was that they were handling like Variety and Television Acts where the business was turning more and more... in fact you could say you know [totally into clubs].

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