

THE CRAMPED OLD DAYS

Jacquie Toye reveals to Edward Thomas working conditions on *The Good Old Days*

Thanks in large part to the efforts of the British Music Hall Society, we have been able to see on television again *The Good Old Days*, made over a period of thirty years from 1953. But as you look at the programmes now from the City Varieties at Leeds, do you wonder how the artists managed in such a small space? For many years Jacquie Toye was one of the troupe of the



Players' Theatre Company that provided a regular feature every week. Recently, Jacquie gave me an insight into what it was like to work in those circumstances.

It was the Players' Theatre boss Denis Martin who auditioned Jacquie in the late '60s when she first met Doreen Hermitage, already established as the choreographer. From then Jacquie worked on and off at the Players in between taking other theatre work as it came along. As far as she can remember she began taking part in the television show in 1973 and stresses that it was always the Players' Company that provided the ballast for all the routines not involving the principals.

When she first arrived at the Players, Jacquie was unaware that it was their company that took part in *The Good Old Days*. She was then invited to participate in the television programme, a process that often involved a heavy load, especially if she was working other than at the Villiers Street theatre at the time. She remembers, for example, jobs coming along such as the film of *The Boy Friend* for Ken Russell.

Jacquie recalled that being in the Players was like working in a repertory company. A particular show would be on for a fortnight and, during the daytime, rehearsals would be under way for the next fortnight's programme. Consequently, the Sunday of each week when the company had to travel up to Leeds was hard-going. As she explained: "We had to get up at some ridiculous hour in the morning, making sure we took some food with us. To begin with, we travelled up separately but eventually we decided to hire a minibus. As its name implies, a minibus is quite small. So a long journey up to Leeds and back at the end of a long working day was quite uncomfortable."

The journey was made easier with the likes of Dudley Stevens, Deryk Parkin, Jan Hunt, Graham Richards, Lorraine Hart and other good folk for company. "Sometimes Doreen would be with us but other times she went up the night before." After four hours the minibus would trundle into Leeds where, as often as not with places on Sundays in those days: "It wasn't necessarily open!"

Then there was the City Varieties Theatre itself to contend with. Before its massive redecoration programme it was still as it had been in Victorian days. Jacquie Toye makes no bones about it. "It was just awful! There were no dressing rooms for us, only the principals, but even they weren't brilliant by any stretch of the imagination. We girls had to use the stage manager's office. I don't know where the boys changed. I suppose there was running water somewhere but I can't remember where. The office wasn't tidy. It was a bit stinky too 'cause the stage manager had this dog, a lovely dog but one that obviously had skin problems!"

What did they use for mirrors to make up? "We had to take our own and balance them on a desk or a sill. Not easy when sometimes we had to have a quick change." She reflected on how everything was on a small scale but observed: "In Victorian days everyone was smaller, height-wise and width-wise!"

What was the format of those Sundays themselves? "When we got there, the first thing was to sort out where we were going to change, us girls establishing ourselves in the office. Then the next thing was to be introduced to our costumes. There would never have been time for a fitting, which was not a problem but they could be uncomfortable. We did, though, have a brilliant costumier whom we would all have visited during the week before, but that was another thing that took a great chunk out of our lives. The costumes were custom-made for each of us. But they had to be of a certain style and sometimes you could find the bones sticking in you a bit."

During that same preceding week the company would have rehearsals at the Players' Theatre. As she looks back, and sees the current repeats of the original transmissions, Jacquie's admiration for Doreen Hermitage is renewed. "I don't know how she coped. There is only so much you can do with dance patterns on a small

stage. There was next to no wing space on either side. On the off-prompt side you just went into a wall. All entrances were from prompt side. Yet Doreen managed to achieve a different routine every single time."

Then the Sunday progressed with lighting and sound rehearsals. "We weren't involved with those until we started going over our routines with the band, directed by Bernard Herrmann. He was so squashed in the pit. I don't know how they managed it. Bernard was a lovely man. He had to contend with some of the variety acts whose music sheets, their 'dots', were in an awful state sometimes. Some of them were so old, ready to fall apart and they would fall off the music stand. My Paul (Jacquie's late bandleader husband Paul Davis) had this a lot. And, of course, everything had to be done in the old music hall style and some of the artists had never done it before, so they would have to learn quickly the music hall approach. Bernard often had to adapt music for the occasion and arrange it with the artists themselves. I realise now just how much work went into that side of things."

At some point in the afternoon there would be a music rehearsal for the Players' company. "You would walk through your positionings, although we got so accustomed to the size of the stage that it became easier as time went on. At the start it was surprising to find such a small stage and it had an enormous rake on it as well, so there was a lot to get used to."

I was surprised to learn that the troupe never had to be aware of the television cameras. "We played it entirely to the house. It was up to Barney Colehan, the producer, who was ensconced outside in his television caravan to deal with all the camera angles." All of which was good to hear and rather different from today's world. Wyn Calvin has said that with every modern Royal Variety Performance he attends now, the whole thing is played to the television cameras rather than to the theatre audience.

Following the walk around the stage in ordinary clothes to establish placings, and for Barney Colehan to work out his camera angles, there would be the dress rehearsal, although there might not necessarily be time for a complete run. "Sometimes it would be a topping and tailing of numbers, which means that you eliminate most of it and cover only the start and end of the numbers. That could be scary, not having a complete run but it was a question of needs must. The principals all had to have a complete rehearsal of their acts: jugglers, trick cyclists and so on. Somewhere along the line we would have a tea break. The audience would come in and be installed in all their Victorian finery by about 7.30."

Jacquie recalls that the troupe rarely sat in the auditorium to watch the other artists rehearse. "Most of the time we were all so flipping nervous, 'cause you were doing a one-off that was recorded, and there for posterity. A lot of the time we didn't even meet the artists. We had a little space laughingly called the Green Room, just a few seats and that was about it, but I do remember once having a long conversation there with Arthur Askey, who was such a dear."