

VARIETY AT NIGHT IS GOOD FOR YOU

On its official publications Equity follows its full title – British Actors' Equity Association – with 'incorporating the Variety Artistes' Association' ...and thereby hangs a tale, told as briefly as possible here but much more fully by Peter Honri in *Music Hall Warriors* (1997).

Equity was founded in 1929 – a significant year in the cultural, social and political life of the United Kingdom. To take just a few examples – films were increasingly being released as 'talkies' and more and more cinemas were being adapted, or built to accommodate them at prices theatres could not match; unemployment was on the climb with industry badly affected by the drying up of exports to the United States of America following the Wall Street Crash; the second Labour Government was in power while revolution was in the air throughout Europe. Professional actors must have felt that in what were proving tumultuous times they had better organise themselves into a trade union.

Performers on the 'legitimate' stage had attempted this twice already – forming an Actors' Association in 1891 and an Actors' Union in 1907 and had even staged an actors' strike in 1921 but for various reasons neither organisation had proved as effective as the V.A.F., founded in 1906.

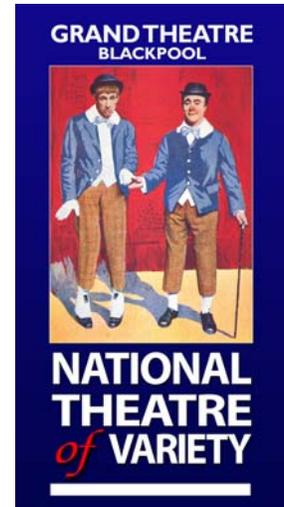
This was also a significant year politically – the Conservatives had suffered a massive defeat at the General Election. Twenty-nine labour MPs had won seats and so with the aid of twenty-four 'associates' among the Liberal majority they were able to ensure that a lot of 'social' legislation was passed.

Capitalising on the prevailing trend, performers on the 'illegitimate' stage founded the Variety Artistes' Federation and within a year came its first strike.

That the V.A.F. was able to make such rapid strides was perhaps due to the fact that it was not the first time that music-hall performers had formed a trade union.

A Music Hall Artistes Protection Society had been inaugurated, under the chairmanship of George Leybourne in 1873. The Musical Hall Artists' Association sprang up briefly in 1884 under the chairmanship of the ebullient and thoroughly True Blue Charles Coburn in response to an attempt by managers not only to fix a maximum salary for each class of act but also to reduce the ones they were already paying. It failed as some managers quickly broke their own rules to secure the services of popular artistes.

Much more successful was the Music Hall Artistes' Railway Association set up in 1897 with a definite purpose in mind – to secure cut-price fares from the railway companies. It rapidly signed-up over 5,000 members and proved so successful that *The Stage* suggested that it ought to extend its scope 'to cover all matters appertaining to music-hall artistes'.



The M.H.A.R.A. committee took up the challenge and realising that having cut its teeth so well in negotiation with the strictly commercial railway industry it might be able to negotiate equally successfully with the increasingly commercially minded theatre-owners and managers. The main bone of contention was the need for an equitable and universal contract.

Various attempts had been made to achieve one between 1903 and 1905 but all had failed. Eventually early in 1906 a meeting between the M.H.A.R.A., the Grand Order of Water Rats and several other music-hall friendly societies issued a very politely worded 'memorial' (i.e. memorandum) in which two paragraphs summarised the performers' main grievances:

“Notwithstanding the vast increase in the popularity of music entertainments (due, in some measure, your memorialists submit, to the work of the artists themselves), and the great addition to the number of variety theatres, the position of the artist has suffered great deterioration.

“Whereas a few years ago artists were called upon to give only six or seven performances per week, they are now required under the two-houses-per-night system to play twice that number (and in some cases, unfortunately, matinees in addition), but except in a very few instances they have had to give these twelve, thirteen, fourteen, or fifteen performances for the same salary they received for six or seven hitherto. To these altered conditions they have submitted in the interests of the proprietors; but now the provisions of the barring clause are being so rigorously enforced as to inflict a great additional hardship and heavy financial loss on artist who are out of work by preventing them accepting contracts when engagements are offered.”

Although the 'memorial' was circulated to all the music-hall proprietors and managers, only one bothered to reply – Oswald Stoll. It was during the following well-publicised (in both the trade and the general press) 'exchange of views' that the *ad hoc* group formally converted itself into the Variety Artists' Federation. It quickly enrolled several thousand members and just as quickly was suddenly presented with a chance to flex its muscles.

Walter Gibbons was busy forming a chain of halls and had taken over the Brixton Theatre with plans to re-open it purely for variety as the Brixton Hippodrome in December 1906. He had even got as far as naming a date and signing-up an opening bill when the London County Council refused his application for a twice-nightly music and dancing licence. Gibbons' solution was to transfer all the staff from the Brixton Empress to the Brixton Hippodrome and all the staff from the Hippodrome to the Empress. The V.A.F. (supported by the local trades association) quickly mounted pickets at the stage doors of both venues.

Some performers and staff crossed the lines, some did not and Gibbons brought in non - V.A.F. members to fill the gaps. Audiences had no idea what to expect. At the end of a fortnight's chaos, Gibbons decided to close the Hippodrome and return the Empress to its old regime. Having successfully won this local battle the V.A.F. decided that it could operate on a larger stage and arranged a meeting with the Amalgamated Musician's Union and the National Association of Theatrical Employees at the Surrey Theatre on 20 January 1907.

Once again Walter Gibbons was chosen as the main target and the V.A.F. set out its terms very clearly. They included:

That all his halls, or halls under his control working two shows a night, all matinees shall be paid for at the rate of one-twelfth salary for each matinee. In one show a night halls all matinees over one per week to be paid for at the rate of one-seventh salary.

“That no artist or artists shall be transferred from one hall to another without his, her, or their consent.

“That a ‘barring clause’ of one mile and three months in London, and five miles and five months in the provinces be adopted.

“That the V.A.F. form of contract be adopted as soon as possible.”

The first demand arose from the change in the method of presenting ‘variety’ from one very long show involving a stream of acts introduced by a chairman to an audience some of whom were seated informally at tables enjoying a drink (or two) while others wandered in and out, and round and about, the auditorium to shorter bills given twice a night to an audience seated as in a ‘legitimate’ theatre. However, some of the spectators may still have been on the move during lesser acts only taking their seats, standing still or coming out of the bars for the top turns. The change was so successful that some managers had started to squeeze in matinees for shift-workers not able to attend in the evening.

Many artists found the ‘barring clause’ particularly irksome and Oswald Stoll explained the reasoning for it to his own satisfaction (and *Daily Telegraph* readers) thus:

“The barring clause is really the foundation of the “variety” superstructure. It means that the managers pay a large salary for the exclusive services of an artist. Performers who appear anywhere and everywhere soon tire the public, but when they play at one place alone they speedily assert their true value...”

Eventually twenty-two London theatres were picketed.

Outside the profession the General Federation of Trade Unions offered the strikers its ‘hearty support’.

In the meantime the Variety Agents’ Association pledged support for their clients while the London Entertainment Protection Association [of Music Hall Managers] determined ‘to resist the attack upon certain members by the National Association. When this statement was issued the L.E.P.A. rank and file probably did not know that some of their colleagues were already meeting representatives of the Alliance on a ‘Conciliation Board’ under the chairmanship of George R. Askwith a senior civil servant with the Board of Trade.

The Alliance held a series of mass meetings at the Scala and an informal meeting at the Trocadero with various interested parties under the chairmanship of the Joe Lyons – obviously the closure of the halls was affecting the sales of refreshments in their vicinity.

On 11 February the Alliance managed to put on its heavily promoted ‘Night with the Stars’. It was

only just in time as the following morning the Board of Conciliation issued its First Interim Award and all the 'struck' theatres re-opened.

The strike having been dubbed the "Great Music Hall War" by the press there had to be a Peace Night and accordingly:

"There was general satisfaction on the resumption of engagements by the artists, and the managers signalled the event by decorating their palaces with draperies and devices. At most of the houses there were lavish displays of flags and bunting, and announcements "Strike Settled", in large letters. Swinging across the road from the Vaudeville Club, the headquarters of the Water Rats, was a bold announcement, "Peace, all the old favourites will appear at the music halls to-night."

Not surprisingly as it was the first attempt to codify the terms of employment not only of the performers on stage but also the musicians in the pit and their workers backstage it was June before Askwith could issue the 'final' award and even then meetings had to be held regularly to tidy-up various aspects of it and the contracts did not become mandatory until 1919.

The completed award is a fascinating document (unfortunately far too long to quote in full here) as in suitable but thankfully simple legal wording it gives a very clear idea of how variety artists worked (or were supposed to work) in the 1900s.

But what exactly was 'variety' and how did it differ from 'music hall'?

Numerous commentators principally those involving the ubiquitous 'Good Old Days' aspects, have always tended to treat Victorian music hall as if it provided entirely musical entertainment, with the "Variety Virus" entering the scene only in the 1890s. In fact the word 'Variety' had been used in its modern theatrical sense long before the phrase 'music hall' was coined, round about 1840, to describe the entertainment rather than the building in which it took place.

There was, however, a definite and significant difference between post-1840 and pre-1840 music hall – the culture of personality. What in fact happened was that although there had always been stars in all branches of popular entertainment, their names were not as frequently recorded as their 'modern successors'. Their rise to fame coinciding with the development of modern advertising techniques and the spread of popular national and local newspapers, especially from the 1860s onwards when more and more entrepreneurs (usually associated with catering and the licensed trade) realised that there was money to be made from this new form of business.

As a result popular entertainments of all sorts began to be formally organised and regularly presented in specially built 'music halls' - a posh name pinched from those buildings already in use for the presentation of 'serious' music - for financial gain by property developers, theatre owners, limited companies, share-holders and agents as well as the performers themselves.

Unfortunately, the American names 'vaudeville' and 'burlesque' have perhaps become more familiar than Variety especially to people brought up on Hollywood musicals. Since 1930, 'popular music' and, since the mid-1950s, 'pop music', have been used to describe more recent manifestations of the purely musical elements of popular entertainment with some 'pop' performers increasingly using

elements of variety, and circus to bolster their acts.

It is extremely difficult to explain succinctly to people who were not there what variety shows between say 1910 and 1960 actually were like. Not that they remained exactly the same throughout the period especially as 'revues' often starring 'variety' performers were also presented. Initially, it probably all boiled down as usual to finding a new brand name to attract the punters.

But after the First World War, the change grew apace as part of the overthrowing of everything 'old-fashioned'. Long-established music-hall acts found they had to become less static or lose their places as younger audiences demanded faster-moving more streamlined shows.

The old-time chairman had long gone and audiences identified the acts by numbers on signs attached to the proscenium, matching numbers in the programmes. Bills at the better variety theatres were carefully constructed and producers had a wide-range of speciality acts from which to choose: ventriloquists; animals and bird impersonations; impersonators of famous current (and often not so current) personalities; roller and very occasionally ice-skaters; acrobats; aerialists; some walking tight-ropes from the stage to the upper circle over the audience's heads; strong men – and women; trick cyclists; mind readers; memory men; magicians; 'serious' musicians; jazz men; blues singers; dance bands; crazy bands; pianists of all types; performing animals - domestic dogs as well as seals and horses; and every kind of dancer from ballet to eccentric and occasionally the very eccentric - i.e. with just one leg.. You name it; most could find places on the bill somewhere.

But of course, the star singers and comedians were usually the main attractions. Not that all were equally popular throughout the country. Some, especially comedians, could only appear in certain areas as many made use of local dialects or commented on local life and customs – mysteries outside their birthplaces.

Unfortunately the standard of many supporting acts fell alarmingly in the early 1950s, when, particularly in the provinces, real variety was increasingly replaced by 'revues' featuring strippers - so well satirised by John Osborne in *The Entertainer*.

What finally did for most provincial and suburban London variety theatres was the cavalier attitude towards their audiences displayed by many owners, managers and producers resulting in slipshod shows and poorly maintained buildings at a time when war-time introduced austerities were beginning to disappear very swiftly.

So sadly when the V.A.F. celebrated its Golden Jubilee in 1956 the variety scene was cracking up under a number of pressures including the introduction of commercial television into the U.K. and a surge of interest in rock and roll helped enormously by the release of several films including *Love me Tender* starring Elvis Presley (American Guild of Variety Artists' member 165890) which enabled his increasing number of British fans to put a face, and a body, to his voice.

Interestingly these pressures are illustrated on the cover of the brochure the VAF produced to commemorate its Jubilee. Under the title *The Golden Jubilee Book of Show Business* an Edwardian couple watches a troupe of performing 'modern' dancing girls (in reality one was always out-of-step

and some of their tights had seen better days) while below them a ribbon bearing the legend '1906 – 1956' is supported by a couple of 78s and a television set.

When eventually the V.A.F. integrated with Equity in 1967 the great days of 'Old Time Variety' were well and truly over.

However, over a generation later in 2006 the V.A.F.'s centenary is taking place against the backdrop of another rapidly changing entertainment scene. Television is losing its hold on the mass audience and although audiences are still turning out for all types of music in concert halls and clubs many young people are turning to circus and variety for a 'new' experience.

It is against this backdrop that the National Theatre of Variety is being launched at the Grand Theatre. It looks as though Equity and the Grand have timed it well. For it is obvious that to slightly adapt the closing sentence of Vic Oliver's piece in *The V.A.F. Jubilee Book*: 'Variety dead? Nonsense. It's just been having forty winks.'

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