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Ellis Ashton as The Chairman

WHITHER VARIETY?

Ellis Ashton,

Vice-Chairman

**B.M.H.S. Discusses the
Place of Music Hall in
The new Union Set-up**

PEOPLE often ask, "What is the purpose of the BRITISH MUSIC HALL SOCIETY? Do you just dabble in nostalgia or have you a practical aim?"

In my view, as a founder-member even if we were nostalgic alone, it would be well worth while for the pleasure we give many. But we go further than that. Since we formed on September 11, 1963, we have put two long-forgotten halls, McDonald's (1863) and Wilton's (1858) on the map.

Following our representations, Wilton's is officially recognised as a Building of Historical and Architectural Interest (and if there is an older Music Hall I should like to know of it). We officiated at the unveiling of a plaque to the memory of Albert Chevalier, and the Greater London Council are considering erecting another two at our instance, to George Leybourne and Little Tich.

Most leading variety artists belong to our Society, but we have little in the way of funds to make a big impact.

Who, then, is going to fight for us?

The answer is the unions.

SIR TOM'S DISCIPLE

When I was President of N.A.T.K.E., which seems a long time ago, I fell under the spell of the redoubtable Sir Tom O'Brien, a great lover of the light theatre, and I pressed our case at the T.U.C. and elsewhere, with little success.

But I was only following the line of the Variety Artists' Federation, founded in 1906. The Federation's first success was the Music Hall Strike of 1907 which resulted in better conditions for performers.

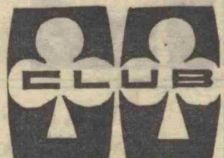
Since then it has waged war on

behalf of its members as halls closed firstly with the advent of the cinema, and latterly with the television screen which brought entertainment on tap into our very homes.

Who can forget the epic struggles to keep Finsbury Park Empire, Golder's Green, and Wimbledon from falling to the destroyers' pickaxes?

When the Government appointed a Minister of the Arts we felt at last that here was a champion who would save the variety theatre. But it was not to be.

Other countries, particularly those behind the Iron Curtain, think just as highly of the variety artist as they do of the actor. When I was in Prague, for example, I visited the



famed Varieties and the highly technical marrying of live performer and film known as the Magic Lantern, both of which were as much State supported as the Ballet and Opera.

But here, this type of thing is not "Culture" and so must be put down. Can anybody honestly say that Hetty King's impeccable presentation is less artistic than Flora Robson's, or that Felix Aylmer exudes more charm and personality than Randolph Sutton? And would the films Dame Hetty and Sir Randolph be less worthily carried?

It is not my function to relate the circumstances which led to the unification of the V.A.F. and Equity, but here now is a formidable force. For those of us who were privileged to serve on the Executive Committee of the V.A.F. and who now sit on the Variety Advisory Committee of Equity our duty is clear.

We must fight with every weapon at our disposal demolition of the few remaining Variety theatres. We must persuade the Arts Council and similar bodies to allocate funds to produce Light Entertainment. We must ensure that any theatres now being built either partly or wholly with public money will reflect every aspect of show business, with emphasis on professionals, even though local Councils might naturally favour local entertainers.

We must endeavour to insist on our own representatives on the Arts Council.

It is perhaps a pity that the Minister for the Arts does not have to have any connection with the stage in the first instance, but, of course, if we get on to the question of politics we will find any number of incongruities, which need not be mentioned here.

DEBT TO COUNCILS

Finally, can I say what a debt we owe to some of the local councils, particularly the London ones, which have kept the flag flying with odd nights of Music Hall, even though the purists among us might cringe at the terrible phrase OLDE TYME, which surely must date back to Chaucer's time, long before the Halls came in to being.

To the Ted Dobsons and the George Fords we are eternally grateful. So let us arrest decay, let us amplify the Song and Supper revival which our clubland friends have launched, and let us all join in the V.A.F.'s anthem "Let's All Go to the Music Hall where the shows are gay and bright". Be seeing you!



BEEF FROM BIRMINGHAM

FROM time to time I am approached to ask the many ent. secs, who read THE STAGE about legitimate complaints which some artists have.

Top of the list is the prevalent habit of selling raffle tickets while an artist is performing.

This can be very upsetting to even the most seasoned performer and a little bit of organisation in advance could do away with this.

Another moan is the "finale", where the artists appearing are brought on at the end to take their bow and sing a "cheerio" chorus in which the audience join. Usually at this time the hall is barely a quarter full, all the audience having departed for buses, etc.

Still another major cause of complaint is artists having to hang around after a show until the ghost walks. All artists do not have their own transport, and I can imagine how infuriating it must be for an artist to arrive at a bus stop to find that his last bus has just gone.

Could it not be possible to pay the artists in the interval and also make arrangements for return bookings at the same time?

Most of these officials live on the club's doorstep, or are sure of a lift from some of their friends. Not so the poor artist who may have to travel anything up to twenty miles to a show and usually there's nobody going their way, and by the time they've unearthed the "lolly walk" their last bus has gone.

Brian Doyle

CLUB ARTISTS AND BOGUS AGENTS

George Knapman, Hon. Sec. the Entertainment Agent's Association writes:

IN reply to Mr. Grainger's article last week, I would like to say that this Association has been campaigning for more than thirty years for the registration of every person practising as an agent.

The section of the Employment Agencies Bill dealing with this particular point has received our unqualified support.

The Entertainment Agents' Association are members of the Variety & Allied Entertainment's Council of Great Britain and I am sure the London members of the Variety Artists' Federation would confirm to Mr. Grainger the considerable assistance we have contributed to this Council, both in preparing the new contract and to the success it has achieved throughout the business.

We too, are most anxious to eliminate the "bogus agent" and only by co-operation on both sides of the industry can this be achieved.

BATTLE OF THE GIANTS

● Dickie Arnold and Dottie acclaimed by their fans as the greatest double act in the business, clinched their eminent status by a fantastic week at The Shakespeare Theatre Club, Liverpool, last week.



Dickie and Dottie



Dukes and Lee

● Ronnie Dukes and Ricky Lee acclaimed by their fans as the greatest comedy double-act in the business, clinched their eminent status by a fantastic week at Allinson's Litherland Theatre Club, Liverpool last week.

● We asked A.T.S., of Leeds, their managers, who had done the best business and they said "Both". We say, neither—A.T.S. are doing the best business. Hardly two of the greatest acts in Clubland.

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