



Jack Was The Boy

IT is just on two years since Jack Buchanan died and the English stage lost one of its favourite musical comedy actors. He had walked on to this stage before the First World War, and in the years that followed he became firmly established in the affections of theatre-goers for the lazy-looking grace with which he sang, danced, flirted and joked his way through countless musical shows. His tall figure, elegant gestures, friendly drawing voice and general air of having a good time cheered up the most languid audience from stalls to gallery.

It is this gaiety and laughter that is emphasised in *The Jack Buchanan Story*, the BBC programme to be heard next week from Sunday Showcase, in which his friends and colleagues reminisce about the man they knew, and recordings from his shows are played. They reveal some aspects of the man who as actor, manager and film producer was almost universally popular.

He was not so popular with his early audiences. Born near Glasgow, his first professional stage appearances were at cheap music-halls in Edinburgh and Glasgow. His first appearance was at a flea-pit called "Packard's Panopticon," where the patrons sat with their chins on the stage, their caps rammed down over their ears, and their tongues ready to comment and destroy. When they realised the terror of the young performer, they commented with such deadly effect that the management sent him off after one performance.

He went to London in 1913, and although he fancied himself as a comic, regretting his looks and his height, the first job he could get was in a pantomime dancing the Argentine tango, which had just become the rage. He took minor parts in shows, toured for two years in *Tonight's the Night*, and then became Phyllis Monkman's leading man in a show called *Bubbly*. By 1921 he was an up-and-coming revue star in *Charlot's A to Z*. He played the lead, produced the sketches, staged the musical numbers, and finished by investing his savings in the touring rights and losing them. He then acquired the rights of *Battling Butler*, produced it in London and played the lead, saw it produced on Broadway, and sold the film



rights for Buster Keaton to play the role. Meantime he had appeared on Broadway in *Charlot's* revue of 1924 with Gertrude Lawrence and Beatrice Lillie, and scored an immense success.

From then on, Jack Buchanan was always in the limelight. Elsie Randolph was the leading lady for the first years. When he was starring in shows like *Sunny*, *That's a Good Girl*, and *Toni*: In 1931 a fair-headed chorus girl named Marjorie Robertson caught his interest, and he gave her the lead in *Stand Up and Sing*. She changed her name for this to Anna Neagle, and made her first starring appearance in films that year, also with Jack Buchanan, in *Goodnight, Vienna*.

In these years, he made several fortunes; and lost them too. Once described as an inveterate gambler who never bet on horses or cards, he financed shows that sometimes flopped. But he kept them going for the sake of the casts, and drew no wages for himself. He invested heavily in a friend, John Logie Baird, who invented television and was working towards colour television when he died. As head of the company Buchanan tried to continue the experiments but was forced eventually to leave them to companies with more resources. He cut his losses with the remark that he had been ahead of his times. He owned one London theatre, and lost thousands on another in Leicester Square, which later became a cinema. Buchanan had in the meantime de-

veloped into a skilful actor in light comedy. All the same many theatre-goers were surprised when in the war years he took the relatively straight role of Lord Dilling in *The Last of Mrs Cheyney*, and followed this with other straight roles in *Canaries Sometimes Sing*, *Don't Listen Ladies*, *Castle in the Air*, and *As Long as They're Happy*.

He himself failed to see why he should have been so clearly labelled a song-and-dance-man. "Straight plays and musicals are much the same thing," he said. "If a few songs and dances are interpolated into a straight play it becomes a musical, and purely from the point of view of acting, the same artist could appear in either production with the same success. When I was playing in *The Last of Mrs Cheyney*, people would come round to my dressingroom and say, 'I never realised you could act!' The remark was intended as a compliment, but proved how many people are under the impression that musical comedy artists need do no more than sing a few numbers and master a

few dance routines. Nothing could be further from the facts. "If the truth were known, the leading player in a musical production needs a wider range than his colleague who specialises in Rattigan or Anouilh. In addition to having to make a convincing characterisation of his part, he must have sufficient singing and dancing ability to put over the musical numbers. Ivor Novello was an outstanding exception because he created leading parts for himself in his musical plays written in such a way that he never had to sing or dance. Oddly enough, the only serious straight part I have ever played was in one of his musicals, when I took over his role in *King's Rhapsody*."

When he took over from Elwood Dowd in the New York production of *Harvey*, Jack Buchanan had his acting experience put to a severe test. He had ten days for rehearsal, but as the play had been running some time, he did not meet the cast until the afternoon before he opened. Even then, he only saw one setting. "I did not see the Dowd home until I walked on to the stage to make my first entrance," he said. "Never have I been so terrified, either on or off stage."

In Hollywood Jack Buchanan made a film, *The Band Wagon*, with Fred Astaire, and back in England he made *As Long as They're Happy*, from a script which Alan Melville adapted from the play. Alan Melville also wrote *Castle in the Air*, the play which the Coal Board disliked, and in which Jack Buchanan played the Earl of Locharne in London and on tour. So Mr Melville was an appropriate person to script and narrate *The Jack Buchanan Story* for the BBC.

In the programme, Buchanan's leading ladies Elsie Randolph and Anna Neagle remember some of the things that happened to "Johnnie B"; William Kendall and Fred Emney are heard; and Bob Hope appears with Jack in one of the old wartime BBC comedy programmes. Fred Astaire reminisces about the rehearsals of *The Band Wagon*, and Jack's gaiety.

Douglas Furber, who wrote many of Jack Buchanan's shows, became one of his closer friends. In the BBC *Radio Times* he spoke of his friendship.

"I first met him in my acting days," he said, "when I joined the cast of *Charlot's* revue *A to Z*. At first I was nervous of him, but to my surprise he welcomed me with a grin, wished me well, and then went out of his way to help me to succeed. I shall always remember him as a star who was pleased if any minor member of his cast did well. He hadn't many close friends; he was too shy and retiring; but those he had were devoted to him. He never made an enemy."

His friends believed him to be an incorrigible bachelor; it was not until 1949 that his friends were told about his early marriage during the first war to a beautiful Australian singer, and their subsequent divorce. That year he was married again, to Susan Bassett, an American actress who remained happily with him until his death.

The Jack Buchanan Story: ZB Sunday Showcase, October 25.



ALAN MELVILLE

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