



VARIETY is still alive and high-kicking as long as mixed programmes of vigorous and often vulgar entertainment are still with us, although the music-halls and Palaces of Varieties that gave them birth are now mostly showing other fare. So far from withering away in the electronic world of film, radio and television, Variety has invaded these media and flourishes there with no more change in presentation than is necessary for an audience entering the space age.

Some idea of the continuity of the Variety tradition can be gained next week when ZB Sunday Showcase broadcasts a survey of British Variety artists, their voices and characteristics called back from old recordings and newer tapes to show what has delighted British audiences in search of laughter and song.

Originally they were also in search of beer, for British Variety began in the taverns. It took more than beer to keep the public in the pubs in Victorian England, so every bar was provided with an annexe where patrons could be entertained with comic songs, dancing and acrobatics. In Lambeth the Canterbury Arms was so crowded that the owner, Charles Morton, opened a special building with a stage as well as a space for tables and chairs, and so became "the father of the Halls." Throughout the 1850s publicans were buying the houses, schools or chapels next door and turning them into music-halls, where the high prices paid for popular entertainers were more than covered by the sales of liquor (although later on admission was charged).

The programmes were strictly for relaxation—tuneful, gay, and just a bit naughty. The subjects were the traditional sources of British amusement—the lodger, the mother-in-law, the brokers' men, the overdue rent, the seaside holiday, and the beer, with a few sentimental or patriotic ballads interspersed. The music-halls provided the pop-tunes of the day, and some of them are still being sung. And audiences were ready to join in the choruses, or in the

shouting, whistling and general rowdiness that made up the spirit of the halls, where nothing was restrained or sophisticated.

When in more prosperous times the halls were rebuilt to exclude the supper tables, the entertainment lost much of the boisterous element of the old days, and the gilt and plush theatres became the Palaces of Varieties. Prices for the best acts had risen—when top acts could get over £200 a week the managers began to run twice-nightly programmes instead of a single programme of 20 acts. Ballets and spectacular shows were imported. The original turns had relied upon the personality of the artists and a bare back-cloth, now the stars accepted the support of colourful backgrounds and well-trained choruses in shows that needed fewer stars and allowed the introduction of newer songs. In the provinces, too, travelling revue companies came into being, and managers found it more convenient to take such a company than search around for 20 attractive turns each week. Theatre prices had risen also, and the larger London theatres put on lavish musical comedies while the smaller ones turned to intimate revue. But the audiences for variety were still there, so the comedians and character singers found themselves in musical comedy, or learning radio techniques, making recordings and appearing in films; and each year taking over completely in the Christmas pantomime season.

Variety performers have always been individuals, learning to merge their

personalities in the demands of a part. In Victorian days they were allotted so many minutes to a turn, and they had to make their impact in that time. They did; the public knew their acts and never wanted them to change.

There was Marie Lloyd, the epitome of Cockney London and one of the earliest singers of naughty songs. The words were quite proper, but Marie never sang them so. Once she was in trouble with the licensing authorities, and had to sing her songs before a committee of the L.C.C. They were easily satisfied because she cut out all her nods and winks.

"Thank you," said Marie, when they had given their approval. "And now may I sing you a real song, such as your wives and daughters sing at home?" The councillors then were horrified at the meanings she revealed in the Tennyson ballad, "Come into the garden, Maud." Marie's songs included "A Little of What You Fancy Does You Good" and her impression of a char-woman moving

house, who lost her husband and her way, and after some dilly-dallying was left with no more than her pet linnet.

Equally popular was Dan Leno, a singer and clog-dancer who became famous for his pathetic imitations from life, like the hoarse-voiced waiter: "Yes, Sir. No, Sir. When I came here first these trousers were knee-breeches. Legs worn down by waiting, Sir. . . . Beg pardon, Sir, I'm sure. My mistake, Sir. You would have it so quickly I got flurried and gave you the Spring Port and the '75 chicken."

There were the coster comics, Gus Elen and Albert Chevalier (who sang "My Old Dutch") and Harry Champion, with "Any Old Iron," and "I'm Henery the Eighth I Am"; and Little Tich, who could make even his cane laugh. Eugene Stratton was one of the first of the black-faced crooners, whose song was "Lily of Laguna"; and Charles Coburn was singing "Two Lovely Black Eyes" and "The Man Who Broke the Bank of Monte Carlo" back in 1890.

Their successors were people like Gracie Fields and Tommy Trinder, and the Cheeky Chappie, Max Miller, with his high-speed and low centre of gravity. Harry Tate and Will Hay had mastered the music-hall sketch, even if they used it elsewhere, and the creations of Flanagan and Allen were in the best tradition. But most of the variety artists of the '30s used material more sophisticated and slick.

Noel Coward and Gertrude Lawrence often had a polish that seems as chromium-plated as the furniture they sat in. Today, live variety is most commonly found in intimate revue, and in cabarets and night clubs, almost as if the wheel has come full circle with the entertainers again in the middle of the wining and dining audiences, although they now hold a microphone.

The old kind of quick change comedy is still plentifully found—on the air, where radio and television present comics as briefly and pungently as ever, and the shows are still varied with the insertion of popular sentimental songs and clever instrumentalists. Even the distinguished guest artists, who sometimes appear are following the old tradition, since actors like Sir Herbert Tree, Sarah Bernhardt and Irene Vanbrugh thought it quite proper to appear sandwiched between acrobats and performing seals.

So a tribute to Variety beginning with the Victorians must come up to date with names like Arthur Askey, Max Bygraves and Norman Wisdom, while Anne Shelton, David Whitfield and Tommy Steele show that popular singers can still provide tunes for errand boys to whistle.

Hail Variety: ZB Sunday Showcase, November 1.

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