

BECTU INTERVIEW: NIGEL WOLLAND AND BARRY QUINTON

(12:58 duration - transcription date: 20 April 2011)

Interviewer:

Tell me about your first Royal Command film performance that you remember.

Barry:

Well the first one, with the live show, with the Ralph Reader Gang Show, was the first one that I did at the Odeon Golders Green, that was the first and that was a Command Performance. Then my involvement after that was really sitting down watching the films, being invited to attend the Royal Film performances which I saw quite a few of them at the Odeon Leicester Square over the years, right up until the one before last I believe, *Ladies in Lavender* was the last one, no I tell a lie, it wasn't. I can't think of the last one I saw, it was the funny ghost story, the name escapes me for the moment, but it was a couple of years ago.

Interviewer:

Right, okay. When was your first Royal Command film in aid of the Benevolent Fund?

Barry:

Oh, the first time I went to the Odeon to help out on the Royal Command was *Close Encounters* and these were the days when I looked after the stage end so I got involved with Sir Sidney Samuelson because he was the Producer of all the live shows while he was, in the early days, before he became President so I got involved with Sir Sidney over the years.

Interviewer:

So you were a sort of a Stage Manager?

Barry:

I was yeah for quite a number of years before I actually went there full time.

Interviewer:

Oh I see, I see, yes. So you were in communication ...

Barry:

I was down on the stage, yes, we had communication with the box but I tended to look after perhaps the Orchestra lift because we used to have Military Bands and Orchestras so I operated the Orchestra lift to take them up and down and also the organ at times because that actually came through the Orchestra lift so I used to take the organist down at certain times or he came up to play the National Anthem with the State Trumpeters and whatever. So that was a number of years before I actually started there so that was in the Seventies and I didn't start there until 1983 full time.

Interviewer:

Right. Okay. So, what can you either remember any particular film or event which sticks in the memory as special?

Nigel:

My only memory is, over the years, they used to be very glossy and high-profile and as the years went on they slowly sort of were getting a bit not so ritzy. They used to have a stage show and the stage show as the years went on slowly were getting less and less and less until virtually all you had on the stage, like the last one I went to which was *The Lovely Bones* you just had the stars being introduced to the Queen from the stage by Stephen Fry. So over those years you could see how it had changed from the much earlier days when you had a stage show as well as the film.

Interviewer:

So is that your memory too?

Nigel:

Yeah, I mean nowadays they use the close-circuit from basically opening time until the stars are presented on stage just before the film starts, whereas in, I say the old days, they had an Orchestra and then, as the Queen arrived, then they switched to the close-circuit and they followed her along the line-up of all the people she was introduced to. And then, as she came into the theatre, the close-circuit finished the State Trumpeters came on and as she came in there was a fanfare and the National Anthem and then there may have been a small stage presentation, but today basically they just introduce perhaps the film's director and a few of the stars and then they all go off and enjoy the film and away you go.

Interviewer:

Go home! ... (laughter) ... No, well I mean, the people who are presented on stage may have seen the films 84 times already so they ...

Nigel:

Well yeah, but then again you give them time to get themselves back to their seats because most of them actually go and watch the film, except for people like Tom Cruise who goes around the Square sort of speaking to people, goes in, does a stage presentation and then goes back out and talks to the people again, you know. That's why we had a balcony put onto the new theatre so that people going in could actually go up out onto the balcony and wave to the crowds so that changed things after the refurb.

Interviewer:

Yeah. Now, you mentioned the crowds now which has reminded me - presumably there was a great, though quiet, security operation going on in the Square and in the Cinema?

Nigel:

Yeah, very much so, people coming into the Cinema had to have tickets and they were checked.

Interviewer:

Yes, but they must search the building as well, I mean go round ...

Nigel:

Yeah, yeah, always before the Royal Film or before royalty there was a dog search all over the building, underneath the stage, underneath the stalls, all rooms were checked and sealed so yes it was very much security minded.

Barry:

And as I said, going in to see it as a customer you again went through sort of airway-tight security.

Interviewer:

Oh really?

Barry:

Yes, oh yes ...

Interviewer:

But that was just for that evening I mean, yes? I haven't been to the Odeon Leicester Square lately and I didn't think you did normally.

Barry:

No, no, yes, that's right. Let's hope not anyway.

Interviewer:

Quite. So, anything else that you want to tell me about about your time in Leicester Square and the Variety, sorry not the Variety, Benevolent Fund shows?

Nigel:

They were mainly just the Royal Films and they were sort of Prince's Trust premieres that Charles used to get involved with. They were basically the ones that were concerned with the CTBF although, saying that, we did the BAFTAs for several years as well.

Interviewer:

I forgot to ask you about that, yes.

Nigel

Because that was quite a big event.

Interviewer:

Yes. And presumably the stage at the Odeon Leicester Square is still a big stage and you only use tiny bits of it?

Nigel:

It's quite big but it's not perhaps as big as some original theatres. I mean we've got that apron at the front where the Orchestra lift can be brought up so you've got that area in front. The screen flies out so, once that's all gone with the speakers and everything, it's quite a reasonable-sized stage which we did for the BAFTAs because they put up their set. Although it's changed recently for 3D, they've got another screen they drop in in front of the other screen, it's a silver screen.

Interviewer:

Right, yes. Of course it was built on the site of an old theatre called the Alhambra.

Nigel:

It was, yes.

Interviewer:

In the Thirties.

Nigel:

Yes, November 1937 it opened.

Interviewer:

Yes, because I think they did actually do some filming, I can't remember, one of Korda's films I think it was, was actually filmed in the Alhambra just before it was pulled down.

Nigel:

Yes it's quite old now, I've never seen it, but it would be interesting to see. But I did have an old actor came in one day who actually appeared on the stage of the old Alhambra and he came in to have a look.

Interviewer:

Yeah, it was a Variety theatre as I remember ...

Nigel:

Yes, yes, the Alhambra was.

Interviewer:

... Variety and Musicals, it was a big place, wasn't it, you know.

Nigel:

It was yeah, because it went right the way through from Leicester Square onto Charing Cross Road because it had an entrance there.

Interviewer:

Yes, yeah, which the Odeon has as I remember ...

Nigel:

Well the Odeon's got a rear exit because you had a yard, an alleyway that ran down the side, but again over the years they added five miniscreens in that area. Although the Odeon doesn't actually go back onto Charing Cross Road because there's an office block which is called Alhambra House on the back which has got a bank in the ground floor and offices above.

Interviewer:

Ah, right. Great. Thank you very much, I think we're done, unless there's anything ...

Barry:

No, the only thing I would add to the Royal Film performances, is it's sad to see how the demise of the industry has affected some of the support one used to get for the Royal Film performance. I mean you had all the individual ITV franchise companies would support it, all the major Cinema circuits would support it, Studios. Today of course it's completely a

different industry and they have long gone and it's just sad to see basically how that has been affected and a lot of people you speak to today within certain parts of the industry have never even heard of the CTBV – it's all alien to them.

Nigel:

Yes, in those days it was recorded by ITV, Thames Television, because they were all part of the Benevolent Fund.

Barry:

They were indeed yes, they were big supporters, Thames Television was.

Nigel:

Yes and it was always a high-profile programme that went out on TV the following evening.

Interviewer:

Yes, I remember, you're right, yes. I mean in my world, in television world which I've been in for a hundred years, the fact that all the ITV companies have disappeared. They have now only ITV Studios I think it's called which is extraordinary to me and they have made programmes for the BBC.

Nigel:

That's right they're doing work for each other.

Barry:

Yes, I also belong to another organization called the British Cinema and Television Veterans and again, it's funny to see how that approach has got with various people. You talk to people because they issue a free pass to Cinema people providing they meet the criteria to go and see a film, normally Monday to Thursdays, to show their pass, and half the people today have never even heard of that organization. They don't even realize there's such an organization for them, so it's just a profile of trying to get parts of the industry recognized by other parts of the industry.

Interview:

Always a problem ...

Barry:

It is indeed.

Interview:

Well, thank you very much, unless there's anything more that you want to say?

Barry:

No, no, unless you want to know about how we met, if that's any ...

Interview:

Well yes, let's do that ...

Barry:

Well I first met Nigel in the days of the West London branch of NATKE where we used to have our meetings on a Sunday lunchtime at the White Hart in Southall, in the days when Ron Pash was the Branch Secretary and Tommy Lever, who's no longer, well both are no longer with us, and he was the Officer of the area, and he actually worked at Southall in one of the cinemas you mentioned earlier.

Interviewer:

There was the Odeon, the Gaumont, the Dominion and the Gem.

Barry:

The Gem, yes. The Gem is where Tommy Lever first started as a pageboy in the Thirties.

Nigel:

And then we sort of ran into each other again after that when you were our Union Officer.

Barry:

Union Officer, yes, that's right.

Nigel:

... on the different arrangements and pay deals and things that changed over the years, with negotiations.

Barry:

Because in those days I had to negotiate with Rank Cinemas, ABC Cinemas, Classic Cinemas, Focus Cinemas, CIC, you know there was a lot. NFT, in the days when we had Alfie Squires down there. You know, today of course it's a free-for-all, unfortunately.

Nigel:

And then you popped in one day.

Barry:

I did indeed, yes, I gave him the shock of his life at the Odeon Leicester Square.

Interviewer:

Right, good, well, thank you once again. Yes. We're there, we're there.