

## Aberystwyth University

### *Talk given at the 'Out of the Box and Dusted Down: Foraging and Findings' Seminar*

Owen, Thomas Roger

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**Owen, Roger. Out of the Box and Dusted Down: Foraging and Findings. A collective event to welcome Honorary Departmental Fellow Barbara Cavanagh and introduce the International Theatre Collection. Foyer, Parry Williams Building, 12<sup>th</sup> May 2009, 6pm.**

Notes for the Cavanagh Collection seminar: or *'How the stories of young men in the War became a part of their comic demeanour and the narrative agency of their own (auto)biography.'*

Walking in to the rooms in which the collection was housed was rather like stepping into a reconstruction of my own brain. Rows of grey shelves like folds in the brain surface, containing seemingly countless books and documents, similarly enfolding knowledge...

Harry Secombe and Michael Bentine's autobiographies, *Strawberries and Cheam* and *The Long Banana Skin*, were widely available on a commercial basis, and were produced for a general readership rather than for an academic community. They can be read as an extension of their comic persona rather than an analysis of their lives.

Roger Lewis's book *The Life and Death of Peter Sellers* is a much longer affair, and arises from the biographer's deep admiration and identification with Sellers during adolescence to a pronounced disillusion and antipathy by the time his material had been fully gathered. It is not the type of book which would appeal just to a fan.

Pauline Scudamore's biography *Spike* is one of a number of accounts of Milligan's life. It is, a life which seemed to lend itself to biography in that it spanned continents, epochs (imperial India, Europe at war, and post-Imperial Britain), and states of mind.

Looking at them, and at their presence in the midst of this collection, one thinks of them as unlikely elements in an important academic collection. There are others, too, thankfully present due (possibly) to an understanding that posterity is not predictable, and that the life of Leslie Crowther, Dick Emery, Joe Collins et al may have some interest for a future study or for those seeking a view of the state of British theatre and performance in the second half of the twentieth century.

What emerged first was an awareness that in these accounts, there was a constant, not always consciously revealed, relationship between warfare, storytelling, comedy and masculinity... comedy acting then (as it still does) as a sublimated form of both sex and violence, for the performers and the audience.

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My interest in *The Goon Show* began when I was in my teens (about 1982), when a number of *Goon Shows* were rebroadcast on the BBC. This is in all probability a very familiar story, given that The Goons' most passionate audience has always been younger men and boys.

Like other comedy phenomena, the Goons have been 'discovered' by generations of those who require confirmation and company in their low-level alienation from society as they emerge into early adulthood.

Being a fan meant being replete with knowledge; a knowledge acquired not out of a necessary academic interest, not as a means of establishing a thesis or a case, but as a result of some kind of psycho-sexual need (it being adolescence). This was, and still is, an instructive memory for later academic life.

Trying to be funny was a means of attempting to assert your individuality at a time when that was in serious need of confirmation from your peers, of both sexes.

There is something about comedy at that point – particularly surreal, 'whacky' comedy – which satisfies without seriously transgressing, and which provides a sense of ritual for those who want to sublimate their emergent social and sexual alienation.

It was all appropriately chaotic, and the Goons' zany humour was tantamount to a kind of denial of the reality of growing up. A very important form for resistance to the act of maturing itself.

Accordingly, the shows were not just something to listen to, they were to 'collected', devoured repeatedly, learnt, performed (often to oneself) and discussed with selected others.

I acquired information not in order to analyse it, but just in order to live with it. This is not an academic thirst for knowledge, it's twitching: masculine, peer competition by indirect means, the laugh fetishized.

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The Goons' curious location between anti-authoritarianism and acceptance by the very highest echelons of the Establishment is well known. The Prince of Wales was, and presumably still is, an avid fan, and the Goons were accordingly honoured for their efforts later in their careers. There has been a certain amount of discussion and description the Goons as political satire. It seems as though Spike Milligan, in particular, wanted to be acknowledged – occasionally – as an anti-authoritarian figure; and although *The Goon Show* doesn't appear to be notable for its topicality today (because of its tangential craziness and the simple fact that it *lasted* beyond its day), there are a lot of satirical gags and *ad libs* in there.

Spike Milligan was a campaigner for many causes – nuclear disarmament, animal rights and environmental causes being amongst the most obvious – but the prevalent tendency in analysis of *The Goon Show* and of his wider output has seen the political, satirical element as an extension of his own personal and psychological alienation.

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Michael Bentine: *The Long Banana Skin*

Michael Bentine, like Harry Secombe, Peter Sellers and Spike Milligan, made the move from fighting the war to comedy. In Bentine's case, he finished the war near Belsen, having seen – but failing to describe – the aftermath of what had happened there.

He describes, and justifies, his move from the military into comedy as follows:

'My decision to try and make a living as a comedian was prompted by my disgust at the wholesale slaughter of the war and the misuse of Science to achieve it... The dropping of the Atom bomb finally disillusioned me completely when I realized that a scientist would have no free choice in the post war world.' (147)

'...while we were [at Lubeck] there a young Guards major asked me if I could help him out.

'Delighted,' I said, 'always willing to co-operate with the Pongos!'

'You see,' he said, getting slightly nervous, 'It's this camp I'm in charge of – it's not really an ordinary P.O.W. camp but – well – rather a special one – frankly, putting it bluntly, old man – it's a baby farm!'

'A what!' I gasped.

'A baby-farm – you know for breeding Hitler's master race.'

'We've got a large collection of big blonde birds there and, well, they were only put there for one purpose, and now the S.S have gone – they're well – you're a man of the world – so, can you help us out?'

His twenty-four years looked earnestly at my twenty-three years.

'Nothing doing,' I said. 'I'm not bringing truckloads of my airmen down to service your bloody Boche blondes.'

'Funny thing', he muttered. 'They all say that.'

Had I not recently been on leave in Brussels I wonder if my duty would have been so clear to me. (141-2)

His subsequent removal to a psychiatric ward 'with some other types who had also had a basinful', following double pneumonia (he couldn't stop crying; in his own words – 'not weeping – just crying – pints of water from my tear ducts, quite happily.') (142)

He formed a double act with a friend, Tony Sherwood, called Sherwood and Forrest.

They auditioned at the Windmill Theatre, and were accepted. It was at the Windmill that Bentine first met Harry Secombe. Secombe then introduced him to Spike Milligan.

'[Vivian] van Damm.. had turned the Windmill into a very respectable and tasteful nude show, with a sprinkling of entertainers. He had helped create a new breed of comedians, who were both original and tough enough to face an all-male audience with ultra-clean material.'

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(p.150-1) for a description of their mental state and their migration to comedy after the war, and also the description fo the playing conditions at the Windmill and the audience there.

The Windmill emerges as a very curious kind of sexual endurance event...

Sherwood and Forrest disbanded as a double act, and Bentine went solo. His breakthrough came with the 'Chair-back routine':

'During a demonstration of yet another new act, before my kindly disposed and long-suffering relations, I stood on an old second-hand chair and accidentally broke the back off it.

The chair back had broken in a peculiarly distinctive way, leaving an odd shape in my hands.

Somehow it looked like a submachine gun and, as I held it, I said "I suppose you'll shoot me for breaking this." Suddenly, like the literal bolt from the blue, the act hit me between the eyes.

If the chairback could look like a tommy gun, what other shapes could it make? Then and there, between us, each vying in excited competition to outdo the other, the chairback in our hands became a plough, a comb, a flag, a wood saw and a whole host of other things.'(154-5)

His act developed into a mad professor routine, supplemented by his knowledge of science...