

## Aberystwyth University

### *The Little Review*

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Stephen Greer.

The Fourth Forage: on Wednesday October 27th 2010, 5pm, Venue: Postgraduate Seminar Room.



CPR: International Theatre Collection (ITC) forage

In working with and thinking about this object, I've become concerned with the question of function – the purpose it might have served in the past, in ~~what~~ <sup>where</sup> it might be viewed as its original context. At the same time, I think we can consider how that purpose (or rather, purposes) are reproduced and transformed in the context of the archive.

That is to say, this object has – at the least – a plural existence as a theatre programme of the Little Revue at the Little Theatre, December 1939, and as an unlisted artefact in box 31, an as yet un-catalogued section of the international theatre collection. Each of these lives has within it plural possibilities, multiple functions. <sup>So in this response I've been asked in its direction: to the object itself, with the advice of a priority to provide evidence of how far it. And of the one time I've spent with it. It's the answer to the question of context in an attempt to make it.</sup>

<sup>This is a</sup> This theatre programme is a <sup>multifunctional</sup> ~~multifunctional~~ tool, for the Little Revue, a revue show which ran for 415 performances in 1939 and 1940. It credits the revue's creator – Herbert Farjeon, who had joined the theatre's management in 1937 – as well as those who advertise within it. The performers are part of the combined sales pitch – stars of popular revues whose performances we have enjoyed before and new acts, like Joyce Grenfell, who are at the beginning of their careers. (Farjeon, incidentally, is credited with discovering Grenfell; her first stage appearance was in Farjeon's revue *Light and Shade*).

The programme carries features for information and light-relief: there is a recurring competition called "Jumbles." The prize for deducing the correct name of a famous English comedy and character actor is three dancing lessons with Miss Gweneth Walshe. The second prize is a single lesson. <sup>from a book made up of jigs and ditties</sup>

Above a selection of short comic stories in a feature titled "gloom chasers", the magazine's publisher makes the following apology:

**To Our Readers**  
*Owing to circumstances occasioned by the war, we are compelled to reduce the Magazine Programme to this abridged edition. We, however, assure our many readers that, when times become normal, all our usual editorial features will be restored.*

Sold at the price of three pence, ~~the programme was a money-making venture~~ <sup>the programme was</sup> also a souvenir, a collectable in its own time – at the bottom of every other page we're prompted: "Don't forget to bring home your magazine programme."

It is sometimes hard to judge the tone of the text. The theatre gossip column in the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of the programme confides:

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FIRTH SHEPHARD tells us that he will bring Leslie Henson back to the West End early in the New Year in a non-musical farce. Rehearsals are beginning immediately after Christmas, by which time Mr. Henson will have returned from France, where he is entertaining troops.

Mr. Shephard's autumn plans were completely upset by the outbreak of war (he had announced three productions to follow "Sitting Pretty"—"Prison Without Bars," a second musical and a Leslie Henson farce), but he has now got back into his stride. He now announces that he will have three, and probably four, productions running in London early in the New Year.

It functions as a kind of trans-historical object, both recalling and prefiguring moments in the theatre's own history: the cautionary frontplate reads:

In the event of an Air Raid Warning, an announcement will immediately be made from the stage and members of the audience wishing to take advantage of the A.R.P. Shelter next door will be directed to it.

The performance will continue uninterrupted even if an Air Raid actually takes place, the A.R.P. authorities having inspected the theatre and pronounced it to be quite as safe as any shelter.

The theatre was bombed to destruction twice in its lifetime, once in each world war – once before the programme's publication in 1917 and again after, in 1943.

From the perspective of the archive, we might recognise how the programme records a material practice: of paper-making and the use of staples which have long since rusted. Despite the programme's (increasing) fragility, it seems to gesture towards its own preservation or longevity: the magazine programme is "always enjoyed, never destroyed."

As I spent time with this document – or rather, two documents, the second and third editions of the programme – I was struck by the density of this kind of artefact. I realised that I had moved from a primary focus on the object itself to treating it as a kind of cipher or index for an historical moment, a meeting point for a series of lives, practices and performances.

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The particular forms of stage names, for example, gesture towards professional biography - particular moments both in individual, professional lives and in the life of the acting profession.

Hermione Youlanda Ruby Clinton-Baddeley ( an English character actress whose later career included the film adaptations of Tom Brown's School Days, Graham Greene's Brighton Rock and the role of Ellen the maid servant in Mary Poppins) is listed, simply, as Hermione Badely.

Cyril Trimnell-Pritchard (an Australian-born actor who moved from Sydney to New York before arriving in London in 1925) appears as Cyril Pritchard. Like Baddeley, the New Revue is only one point in an extended career - a career which for Pritchard included a Tony Award for a production of Peter Pan on Broadway a little more than ten years later in 1954.

The running order of the revue's sketches, songs and musical numbers provides another index, another series of points of contact with other histories and practices. One advert, for example, invites us to buy a copy of the New Revue's music (words by Herbert Farjeon, music by John Pritchett) featuring its most popular song - Even Hitler Had A Mother.

The American publication Time, in a "foreign news" feature from April 1939, provides context:

On the uncensored New York stage public personages of the day, domestic or foreign, are impersonated and lampooned with impunity. Appearing in New York this season are Adolf Hitlers, Benito Mussolinis, Joseph Stalins. In other seasons "appearances" have been made by King George V and Queen Mary, the Duke of Windsor, President & Mrs. Roosevelt, the Roosevelt Cabinet, the Supreme Court.

In Britain, however, the 6th Earl of Clarendon, the Lord Chamberlain (alias, censor of Britain's stage and literature), keeps an eagle eye out not only for theatrical obscenity, profanity, sacrilege and references to royalty but also for possible insults to heads of foreign States. Last week, perusing the book and lyrics of a new London revue, Censor Lord Clarendon spotted a song entitled Even Hitler Had a Mother, hastily banned the piece. The forbidden ditty:

*Though we may get furious with Hitler if we're not of Aryan race, Let's remember that when he was littler someone called him Angelface.*

*Though we may not idolize the Duce when the news gets rather grim, Someone called him hoochy-koochy-koochy, that was how she humored him.*

*Even Hitler had a mother, even Mussolini had a ma; When they were babies they were cross, perhaps, But all they needed was a change of naps—maps—*

*Don't be hard upon the Black Shirts, they may be rather Swastika, But even Hitler had a mother and even Mussolini had a ma.*

I haven't had time to discover whether this was true or not.

Certainly, the programme suggests - again - a certain consciousness of the revue's function in the context of the war effort. A feature from the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition programme titled "Potted Criticism" approvingly reviews Herbert Farjeon's Little Revue at the Little.

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## Potted Criticism

HERBERT FARJEON'S "LITTLE REVUE" at the LITTLE.

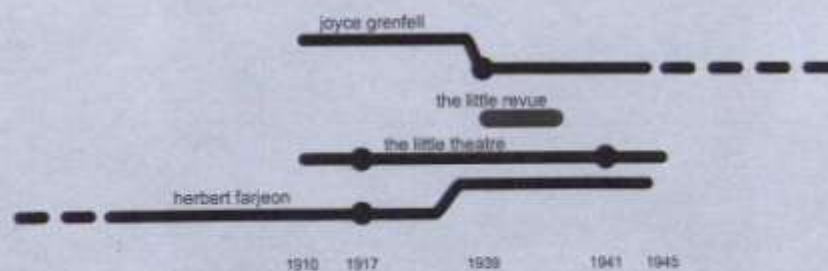
"It's only journalism" we hear at one stage of a delightfully varied, satirical, cynical, evening which is not only entertainment, smart and ingenious, but also penetratingly clever and critical in its topical comment, plus its contrasting and yet harmonious contributions. Of course, Adolf had a mother!—why not ring it? Contemporary journalism gives visibility to the littlest, brilliance to the boring, and this little revue, which is

theatrical journalism, gives all sorts of twists and turns to many legitimate themes. There are songs, scenes, sketches, studies, improvisations, impressions, individualised items, which crystallise and captivate. There is not a dull moment. The programme starts as it concludes: on an artistic note. Specially noted: Every member of a first-rate cast, and especially Cyril Ritchard, Irene Eastwell, George Barton, Joyce Grenfell.—H.D.

The claim on "theatrical journalism" (given tacit approval by the magazine's publishers) is intriguing. Should we treat this as a self-aggrandising gesture, or is there a line to be drawn between the tradition of Farjeon's comic or light entertainment revue and more directly, or consciously political theatre?

Finally, working with this material has provided me with a surplus of information, of possible direct links and unintentional synchronicities. So I've started to think about ways in which I might – or we might – think about articulating the structure of archival knowledge, or the web of knowledge and practices which a particular object might represent or embody. But the image of a network didn't seem quite right – there are connections, certainly, but there is transition through time. What this programme represents might not be so much connection as proximity.

Which leads me to my diagram – which I put together last night, which is a kind of topographical rendering of one element of this archival object. A kind of tube-map of the Little Revue and the Little theatre.



<talk through diagram>

