

MP calls for end to "Binkie's Monopoly"

Bizarre Rumours surround Death of Old Mother Riley

1954: Bizarre rumours surrounded the death of Arthur Lucan, Old Mother Riley, on the opening night of a week's booking at the Tivoli, Hull. Lucan and McShane (his real life wife, Kitty McShane) have been top attractions for the past 30 years, and have starred in 17 films. Their marriage broke up in 1951, but they were still business partners.

Arthur Lucan was recently declared bankrupt, owing the Inland Revenue some £15,000. He was in poor health, aggravated by regular heavy drinking. He died just before the opening performance, and his understudy, Frank Seton, did two shows without the audience knowing the difference. Rumours claim Kitty McShane wished to hide the news of his death and let the understudy play the rest of the week so she could claim the full salary. She is said to have wanted to carry his body out of the theatre in the pretence that he was drunk. These rumours have been denied as malicious gossip, but many people in the variety world are claiming there is "no smoke without fire".

Sir George Robey dies

1954 : Just months after being knighted, George Robey has died, aged 85. Originally a music hall artist known as "The Prime Minister of Mirth", he later turned to classical theatre and even to films, appearing as Sancho Panza opposite Chaliapin in a film of "Don Quixote", and as the dying Falstaff in Laurence Olivier's film of "Henry V".

And Trigger came too

1954 : Roy Rogers, the singing cowboy, together with his wife, Dale Evans, have arrived in London for their first ever British variety tour.

Trigger, their 20 year old stallion, is being flown directly to Glasgow, where the tour opens.

1954: Theatre people everywhere were avidly following newspaper reports of a Private Member's Bill in the House of Commons on March 10th. What seemed like an innocuous bill - "to control non-profit making theatrical companies" - was seen by some as a final come-uppance for a theatre manager who has become much too powerful for his own good, and seen by others as a disastrous threat to the lifeblood of British Theatre.

At the centre of the storm is Mr Hugh Beaumont, the man in charge of one of the biggest - if not the biggest - theatrical organisation in the world. H.M. Tennant Ltd and its subsidiaries. Mr Beaumont - "Binkie" Beaumont to everyone in the business (though only his closest friends would dare call him that to his face) currently has sixteen West End productions running, plus five touring the provinces. He holds a virtual monopoly on the West End.

His enormous power has led to many claims being made about the unfairness of his dealing. It is said

that prior to the present Parliamentary Bill literally hundreds of actors, actresses, designers, authors, stage managers and even some theatre managers were prepared to reveal their complaints to Mr Woodrow Wyatt, the MP who is presenting the Bill. All these people claim that because they are not part of Binkie's inner circle, the actors can get no work, the authors fail to get their plays performed, and managers cannot get theatres either in London or the provinces. (So real is his monopoly, that none of the people giving evidence to Mr Wyatt were prepared to have their name revealed publicly because of fear of reprisals.)

Many other artists are claiming that all the above is total rubbish. Since Tennants are the greatest theatrical organisation in the world, they will only employ the best, and therefore it is the "second best" tier of theatre that is making these complaints.

No one can ever remember such a flurry in Theatreland. The real point of the Parliamentary Bill however was explained by Mr Wyatt in his speech to the House of Commons. Mr Beaumont is a gentleman of the highest integrity and repute who has built up a great theatrical empire by skilful manipulation of the laws of tax exemption, using concessions which were intended for other purposes. "A Day by The Sea" was currently making £3,000 per week. Of this, £500 should normally be paid in Entertainments Tax. But "A Day by the Sea" was being presented by Mr Beaumont's non-profit making subsidiary company, Tennent Productions Ltd. By exploiting the concessions for "educational" theatre, which allows the non-profit making company to pay a weekly management fee to himself, Mr Beaumont was both making money for himself and building up an enormous sum of money which could only be ploughed back into more plays. Accordingly, he had the money to outbid rival producers for any play, actor or theatre, and had created his own monopoly.

The newspapers are having a field day. The headlines read "Why should Binkie be so powerful?", "Binkie is the man they dare not offend", and so on. But it is quite clear that the Bill will fail on its second reading since there is no evidence whatsoever of dishonesty or irregularity in Mr Beaumont's dealings. Woodrow Wyatt has been unable to convince the House that a monopoly is a bad thing when it consistently produces so many superb examples of British Theatre.



Hugh "Binkie" Beaumont, the "eminence grise of the West End, and the most powerful man in the theatre world.