

AFTER THE WAR

What happened to Jasper Maskelyne after the war?

Alistair's letters provided me with valuable information:

“Father had some successful seasons at Christmas time renting a small theatre near Buckingham Palace called the Westminster Theatre. I assisted for a short time as stage manager, but after his remarriage I left England for good and virtually severed my connections with him. In 1950 he was in the position of owing more tax than he could pay, and left England with his second wife. He tried touring in South Africa with his magic show, but without much success. I believe he made the mistake of trying to carry on his Army career in his later days; he was de-mobbed with the rank of acting Major. In all his later social correspondence he styled himself as Major Maskelyne. He carried this attitude through to the stage where he had his assistants dressed in Army uniform. This went down like a lead balloon after the war.

He retained a fondness for army accoutrement and guns, and came into his own during the Mau Mau campaign in Kenya, when he commanded a mobile squad of police. When the troubles were concluded he continued his affair with cars by founding a very successful driving school in Nairobi. The profits were large, but so was his appetite for gin, and he finally consumed all the proceeds and his own life at the age of 70.”

In a later letter, Alistair Maskelyne added more details about the post-war years:

“There was, in the 1940s, an American religious movement known by the name of its founder, Buchmanites. The movement was also known as ‘Moral Re-Armament’. After the war the sect, which seemed very wealthy, acquired a theatre in London in which to present their uplifting parable plays. Most of them enough to make you throw up, unless you are of their persuasion. During the times they were not bothering God with their message type presentations they wanted a harmless apolitical type entertainment to make some money for them by using their theatre. The theatre was the Westminster, just around the corner past Watneys brewery and Buckingham Palace, and my father was the presenter of the harmless entertainment. It was a charming little place, seating only five

or six hundred, ideal for its purpose, with only one big draw back: a small stage and a curved cement back drop, immovable of course.”

“At any rate my father recognised his opportunity and cobbled together some very talented people. Robert Harbin I remember especially well, a charming and practical man, with very interesting and puzzling illusions: quick and dramatic. Another act was Kuda Box, an Indian mind reader, and I recall a dreadful American supposed female fire eater. “She” was actually a transvestite male I believe: all the girls hated sharing their dressing room with “her.”

“The Christmas shows at the Westminster Theatre were a great success and made my father and the Moral re-Armament group a good amount. After this success my father took the show on the road as a vaudeville performance travelling the music hall circuit for Lew and Leslie Grade, both of whom I met. (Lew Grade eventually became a famous TV entrepreneur.) My own function was very peripheral: preparing props, drapes, illusions and scene changing. Just a stage hand. My reason for being there at all was that I wished to be near my mother during her final illness; I had left my ship and resigned from the NZCo in London for this reason, but it was already plain that my future did not lie in England at all. My time in the shipping company had made clear that I wished to live in Australia, where I had had such a good time during my visits to the east coast cities.”

“After the death of my mother in 1947, I moved out of the flat that my sister and I still shared with my father in Kensington. He had rapidly found a female friend who joined him in his love of the bottle at a small and seedy club called the “White Room” somewhere in Soho. A few months after becoming a widower, he re-married. The lady’s name was Mary, and she had connections in Kenya, which accounts for his later move.”

(Clarification: Her full name on the marriage certificate was Evelyne Mary Scotcher. This similarity in names probably explains why Fisher confused the second wife with the first wife (Evelyn Enid Mary Maskelyne). This misidentification still upsets the Maskelyne family. Fisher failed to correct this mistake in the 2004 edition of *The War Magician*.)

“During this period the travelling magic show gradually moved to, firstly the second layer or level music hall circuits, and later, still further to the third level, in small towns like Minehead in Somerset and industrial towns like Wigan and Chester. It was then the conjunction of the strip artiste and magic show took place: the lady who stripped was no longer young, and the whole presentation was tawdry.”

In 2004, I forwarded Alistair details of one of his father’s post-war shows:

“The programmes you sent me took me back to a most unpleasant time. The Colosseum at Harrow was I think the first engagement my father played after the death of my mother, possibly only a week or so after. The music they played in the interval was “Chinese Drum,” and that tune still brings back the dreadful sadness of those days.

Kuda Bux was a tall Sikh with a large hooked nose. This played a prominent part in his act, which had school children from the audience blindfolding him, with lumps of dough and many bandages, after which he would read words the kids wrote with chalk on a blackboard. His nose was the secret: he would rock the mass of bandages so that a tiny channel was left down one side of his nose, and with his head held high he could see after a fashion.

Donna Delbert was a large American person, muscular, dressed in cowgirl gear. Her act came straight from the sideshows of the USA, quite spectacular, lots of fire. Our female assistants in the show hated sharing a dressing room with her; they said she was a deserter from the US Army, and was actually a large hairy man. I think they were right.

My personal friend during that time was Robert Harbin, who had been a performer in the St Georges Hall days. He had a very clever supposed act of mind reading, in which he gave out copies of the London telephone directory to the audience and called for page numbers from the book, after which he went on to recall the names and phone numbers at the head of each page that had been selected at random. He had a great sense of humour and probably helped me to get through that time, with his good nature and commonsense.

This was the show in which my father got permission from the War Office to dress his male assistants in army parade

uniforms; he wore the dress of a major. He insisted on being addressed as “major” by the staff, who thought very little of the idea. They were all ex-army, and just wanted to forget the whole business.”

In 2005, I sent Alistair a copy of Teller’s brilliant New York Times article on the mysterious ‘Donna’ Delbert who turned out to be transvestite Delbert Hill, an American Air Force deserter. Alistair responded jubilantly: *“So the girls in my father’s show were quite right.”*

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