

- **Anthony Green**  
Independent scholar, UK

## **For the Boys Beyond The Blue: Bengal Services Entertainment Association 1942-1944**

**♪ . . *beyond the blue horizon lies*  
*a rising sun* . . ♪<sup>1</sup>**

---

*Compared to the better known World War 2 entertainment organisations, like Entertainment National Services Association (ENSA), Stars in Battledress and the RAF Gang Shows, the Bengal Entertainment Services Association (BESA) was small and short lived. Yet it was in the right place at the right time and became a key component in General William Slim's plans to rescue Burma Corps' morale following the retreats of 1941-42. Its contribution to forces welfare was equally important in 1943-44 after the creation of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army, destined, under Slim, first to stand firm then throw back the Japanese foe. Necessity dictated that BESA used available personnel (civilian and Services) and self-generated resources to entertain British, Indian and Allied troops based across a vast area of Eastern India. Anthony Green, a former schoolteacher, has an ongoing research interest in troop entertainment during World War 2, especially entertainment units in the Southeast Asia theatre, and also in the dance music phenomenon in Britain in the 1930s, in particular the contribution of provincial part-time professional musicians.*

---

Keywords: BESA, ENSA, 14<sup>th</sup> Army, World War 2, India, Calcutta, entertainers, actors, musicians, theatre

Indian words and place names (e.g. Calcutta) have been retained in the form found in the books, diaries and documents examined. The images included in this

article were obtained from the private collections held by the families of Bill Green and Laurence Neal and are reproduced with permission.

### ***Introduction: Safety Across the Chindwin***

The 'Bengal Entertainment Services Association' (BESA) existed from mid-1942 until late-1944 and operated from headquarters in Calcutta. Pressing circumstances dictated its aim: to provide entertainment for Allied forces based in eastern India and Burma. Self-funded, the organisation required the services of civilians to work on equal terms with Army and RAF personnel. The simplicity of the aim concealed the enormity of the task. BESA went where others had feared to tread. Building a successful entertainment organisation to operate in uniquely challenging conditions required many cogs in the machine and much oil applied to keep them turning. Only a measure of timely serendipity enabled BESA Chairman (Mr W. S. C. Tully) to write these valedictory words in October 1944 as the work was completed:

I trust I may be understood if I say how astonishing both the size and value of the organisation has become. I am particularly gratified that the name BESA, and that name only, has always been associated with this work. Stimulating satisfaction has been derived from the many favourable comments we have received from the highest to the lowest ranks of the Army and RAF Units we have tried to serve.<sup>2</sup>

The urgency driving the formation of the organisation related primarily to the huge increase in servicemen in the area in 1942. Some were troops that had retreated before the Japanese, some were reinforcements from Britain, and there were many newly formed Indian units. American allies had arrived to build airfields for their transporter C47 Dakotas and so establish a supply chain to Chiang Kai Shek's Nationalist forces in China. It was essential to maintain the welfare and morale of this diverse force. Arguably the best British military leader of World War 2, General William Slim, had arrived from the Middle East in March 1942 to take command of Burma Corps under General Alexander. He had the vision and ability to quickly identify this need.

By the time he assumed command the campaign was already lost. The lack of preparation in Burma—logistical, administrative and political—led to inevitable collapse and retreat before determined, mobile opponents. By May 1942 British and Indian Forces had fallen back across the Chindwin River to draw a defensive line in Assam. The monsoon brought the Japanese forces to a halt and gave Slim an opportunity to revitalise his troops. He knew that he had to re-equip and re-train. He also knew that he had to boost morale and that entertaining his forces in their leisure time would support and strengthen his aims of refreshing and re-energising his men.<sup>3</sup> He was scathing of the Services' attempts at succouring and rejuvenating the battered Allied forces. The rest and re-enforcement camps were depressing and bad for morale; there were tents or

*bashas*, bamboo and thatch huts, lacking all amenities, mosquito-ridden and supervised by Officers and N.C.O.s who had gravitated to these camps by their incompetence in other duties. He appointed a dynamic Colonel to sort out the mess.<sup>4</sup> By August 1943 a system that placed designated Welfare Officers in all units stationed in Eastern India had been introduced. But this was 1942 and urgent action was imperative. There was a pressing need for an organisation that would provide co-ordinated and regular entertainment for troops under Burma Corps command and for the scattered RAF bases and airfields. As well as bases there were transit camps, leave camps, maintenance and storage depots and hospitals. There was a problem. The 'Germany first' policy of the British Government meant that meagre resources reached the Far East and so self-help in many areas, including welfare, became necessary.

The teeming city of Calcutta was the focus for military activity, as a major port, a gateway to the conflict in the North-East, and a centre for leave and recuperation. A thousand miles away in Manipur and Assam, men sat in fox-holes alert for the intrusions of Japanese raiding parties. They, too, deserved chances to escape the harsh realities of war. The challenge would be to address these diverse needs.

### ***An ENSA in the East?***

There were blueprints for large-scale troop welfare schemes that included an element of entertainment. World War 1 had shown the value of organised entertainment in the rest camps behind the front lines.<sup>5</sup> The lessons learned in the earlier conflict were applied quickly after the outbreak of World War 2. Basil Dean<sup>6</sup> had anticipated the demand and quickly convinced the British Government of the need to create the *Entertainment National Services Association* (ENSA).<sup>7</sup> A huge organisation chasing many different objectives, it was inevitable that ENSA became an easy target for its many critics. Basil Dean's single-minded control antagonised many people and yet, despite its shortcomings, ENSA eventually (1939-1946) entertained more than 500 million.<sup>8</sup> Doubtless the Americans learned much from ENSA when establishing their parallel organisation, United Services Organizations Inc. (USO), in 1941. Entertainment was included in the welfare programs of other nations involved in World War 2. The French and Germans had similar organisations with the *Théâtre aux Armées* and the Wehrmacht's *Truppenbetreuung*. The latter was conceived on a massive scale and its concert parties, theatrical troupes, operatic ensembles and orchestras claimed to have entertained audiences totalling more than 200 million. BESA was not destined to be of that magnitude but its entertainers would face conditions that were as testing as anywhere.

In 1942, far away from London and its resources, there was a coming together of interested parties. The *Lady Mary Herbert Womens' War Fund*, with Lady Mary, wife of the Governor of Bengal, as patroness, and the wives of Calcutta's expatriate businessmen as money-raisers, had enjoyed handsome returns. Their initial target was to fund welfare schemes for Servicemen in Calcutta. Refreshment booths and rest centres were established and run by

W.V.S.<sup>9</sup> There was some money to spare and thoughts began to focus on regular provision of entertainment for Army and RAF personnel stationed in Calcutta and beyond. There were entertainers in the Services' ranks and there were entertainers amongst Bengal's expatriate society. Crucially, Lady Mary Herbert brought all parties together for a meeting held at Government House on June 29 1942. There, representatives of Army and RAF Welfare agreed to appeal for entertainers and sanctioned the transfer of suitable men to an entertainment unit to be based in Calcutta. At the same meeting leading members of Calcutta's two civilian theatrical societies—the *Amateur Dramatic Society* (ADS) and *Calcutta Amateur Theatrical Society* (CATS)—offered the services of actors, backstage managers and theatre administrators, but most importantly, women performers.

BESA was born. A committee was formed under the chairmanship of Mr W. S. C. Tully, an executive for Gillanders Arbuthnot, managing agents.<sup>10</sup> The committee included Army and RAF officers, a solicitor, a headmaster, a dance teacher, a boxing promotor, accountants and a representative of the Indian community. Its brief was 'to provide entertainment for Troops (British, Indian and Allied) throughout Eastern Command and the 14<sup>th</sup> Army areas.'<sup>11</sup> Despite the unusual composition of the Committee, there was unity of purpose. The peril of the times and the urgent need to support the troops meant that the BESA Committee was innovative and dynamic. It was single-minded and free from petty side issues that would dog the ENSA organisation.

During BESA's two-year existence 164 Servicemen transferred to the unit from forces stationed in Bengal. Some stayed briefly because all were subject to recall when war priorities prevailed. In 1943, the Executive Committee requested that these postings, for purposes of organisation and discipline, should be to a recognised military unit with headquarters at the BESA Theatre. Accordingly the *Amenities Concerts Entertainment Service Unit (BESA)*, a branch of the Welfare Service, was created and staffed with Officers and N.C.O.s with theatrical connections. That year it was also decided that men posted to A.C.E.S. (BESA) should be given the rank of sergeant (acting and unpaid). A further 49 Servicemen (including 19 Officers) were able to help BESA because they were posted in the Calcutta area and were willing to give up their non-duty time. A sympathetic C.O. and re-scheduling of duties would free them to perform in the evenings. To match the Forces contribution 156 civilians offered their assistance and expertise. Of the civilians, thirty women joined BESA companies visiting Bengal and beyond and rescued BESA from the prospect of all-male touring shows. These tough ladies braved all the health and climate hazards and were known collectively as the *BESA Belles*. There was civilian help for the administrative side of the organisation. The weekly news-sheet, *BESA Bulletin*, was produced with such help and theatre equipment was installed and maintained by a Calcutta theatre and cinema proprietor.



*Figure 1. The BESA Belles as depicted by Ted Salter. His cartoons and caricatures were a weekly feature of the news sheet, BESA Bulletin. Multi-talented, he was a set designer and his lightning sketch act featured on some BESA variety bills.*

The importance of civilian involvement must be emphasised. There were a few British families with roots in India that went back generations ('domiciled British'), but most were 'home British,' that is, British citizens living and working in India but with the intention of returning to the United Kingdom at some time.<sup>12</sup> Their patriotism was rock-solid and because most worked to fixed term contracts there were few old or retired folk among them. 'Home British' were subject to the National Service (European British Subjects) Act 1940, which demanded compulsory registration for war service, but many were in employment that earned exemption. It is interesting to note that 'domiciled British,' and the very supportive Anglo-Indian community, were not bound by this Act. The women in the 'home' and 'domiciled' British categories joined voluntary organisations with a gusto that did much to dispel the indolent *memsahib* stereotype.<sup>13</sup>

The concentration of British expatriates in Calcutta made the city the natural choice for the headquarters of the entertainment organisation. *Belvedere* was the residence of the Governor of Bengal and the focus for a coterie of officials of the Indian Civil Service (ICS) known for their social dominance as 'the heaven born.' The Army had administrative centres at Fort William and Barrackpore with the RAF at nearby Alipore. In the city were many British professional and business men—bankers, accountants, solicitors, managers—employed to supervise and protect the interests of British companies involved in import and export. Radiating from Calcutta into the hinterland, the *mofussil*, were a sprinkling of their countrymen and women, few in number<sup>14</sup> but significant in status and knowledge of the Indian peoples and their customs. When BESA began to send out touring parties, perhaps nearly a thousand miles to far Assam, these people would be waiting and eager to help. BESA nurtured and consolidated this network so that its artists could expect hospitality during their arduous trips.

### *Dreams Into Reality*

After the inaugural meeting events moved quickly. The first three Servicemen to be released from their units arrived in July 1942—an experienced repertory actor, a stage manager with a West End background, a pianist and dance band leader—and they were billeted (in tents) at Calcutta's 35 Personnel Transit Camp. The camp was in the grounds of St Thomas' School. The school had a hall and stage suitable for rehearsals and its Headmaster was a leading light of the Amateur Dramatic Society and a BESA Committee member. More recruits arrived and tentative rehearsals for a show began. The Company had grown to twenty-strong and received its first civilian re-enforcement when eight young ladies of the Calcutta Amateur Theatrical Society offered their song and dance talents. The BESA Committee cut short this leisurely start by ordering that the first show must take place on Friday 14<sup>th</sup> August 1942. It came as a shock but amply illustrated the intended terms of reference of the BESA organisation. A can-do approach was required, for time was short and the needs urgent.

The school hall was unsuitable as a venue but by lucky chance BESA was approached by a Jesuit priest, a teacher at St. Xavier's College in Park Street, Calcutta, who offered the College facilities. The priest came from an English family with theatrical connections<sup>15</sup> and in the 1930s had both produced school plays and overseen a major refurbishment of the stage facilities, including lighting. The 450-seat theatre was well suited to BESA's needs and, firstly, became the *Garrison Theatre*, but as BESA's standing rose it helped publicity to re-name it the *BESA Theatre*. BESA had a home.



*Figure 2. The BESA Theatre, Calcutta. It was built on the site of an earlier theatre, the Sans Souci, that served British expatriates in mid-Victorian times.*

BESA's debut show, *BESA Buzzin'*, opened as planned on August 14 1942, to good reviews:

BESA, as nearly everybody knows by this time, stands for the Bengal Entertainment Service Association, whose activities are directed towards the entertainment of members of all branches of His Majesty's Forces, has made an auspicious opening with a snappy revue entitled "BESA Buzzin'" at the Garrison Theatre, 30, Park Street, which is intended to be the Association's permanent home. The male members of the cast have all been drawn from the Forces. Most of them were professionals before the war and must be glad of the opportunity of practising their art again. The feminine side of the production has been drawn from Calcutta's young ladies, who have nobly given up their spare time for this cause. We understand that straight plays will be included in future productions, but it was wise to select a light revue for the opening. If one must be invidious in allotting praise, special tribute must be paid to Bert Valentine and his orchestra, which was assembled at very short notice and, with only a minimum of practice, shows that it is capable of the real stuff. Lennard Pearce has an attractive voice. Billy McCrimmon is likely to become Calcutta's most popular light comedian, whilst Con Docherty shows the piano hides no secrets from him. The Fellingier Sisters, old favourites of Calcutta despite their youth, draw once more the applause with their Tap Dance which they so richly deserve. **The Ditcher** <sup>16</sup>

The *BESA Buzzin'* souvenir program contained an open letter from Lady Mary Herbert, wife of the Governor of Bengal, and patroness of the Association, that revealed the sweep of BESA's early (and untested) ambitions.

I am happy indeed to be associated with this excellent organisation, which has been formed for the very necessary purpose of providing entertainment for British and Indian troops stationed in Bengal.

BESA will present not only musical shows, but also straight plays, cinema entertainments, concerts and boxing. Already concert parties have been sent to British units, and within a week others will go to Indian units in the vicinity of Calcutta. Mobile cinema shows have also started touring the districts. Gradually our entertainments will spread to the remotest parts of Bengal and even further afield. <sup>17</sup>

The range of entertainment eventually provided suggests that the above early ambitions were subject to re-assessment and amendment.<sup>18</sup>

Ninety-eight shows were squeezed into the time available, just over two years, indicating a weekly turn-around. The theatre was used to capacity but almost exclusively for variety/revue and plays. Boxing tournaments received good support but always were going to be occasional events. Light classical music was presented elsewhere at other venues in Calcutta. It was not the first choice of the vast majority of Servicemen and there was never a hint that BESA

felt obliged to educate as well as entertain. The same stance dictated the choice of plays. Shakespeare and Ibsen were ignored. In Europe, ENSA came under greater pressure to accommodate the philosophies, exemplified by Reithian BBC and CEMA, that sought to introduce audiences to higher order cultural experiences.<sup>19</sup> For BESA, the reality of the situation was that the theatre was required to generate income and that this could only be achieved by giving the customers what they wanted.

Popular entertainment in 1930's Britain was dominated by cinema and radio. Cinema attendances had soared to astronomical numbers.<sup>20</sup> Naturally, troops wanted to see the latest Hollywood movies and this demand was met partially in Indian cities and towns where local entrepreneurs owned cinemas that screened English-language films. Calcutta had numerous cinemas, some offering the blissful treat of air-conditioning.<sup>21</sup> Having been promised equipment for seven mobile film units, plans were laid, but the promises were broken. New equipment and spare parts were neither being manufactured in India nor being sent from the United Kingdom. The BESA cinema initiative ground to a halt and was eventually abandoned, with great regret.

'Wireless' almost matched cinema in the leisure preferences of working-class Britain.<sup>22</sup> There was never any chance that a comparable service could be made available in India. Radios could be found in the mess halls of the larger camps and depots. There, programs from the BBC's Overseas Service would be welcomed for war news as well as familiar comedy and music shows that reminded of home and loved ones. All-India Radio had a studio in Calcutta and provided a few programs for local Servicemen. BESA assisted by providing entertainers and actors. A series of plays were broadcast, with roles voiced by BESA actors. The recording sessions were popular because a generous fee was paid.<sup>23</sup> The entertainers had their chance in the variety shows *By The Troops For The Troops* (Mondays 1-1.30 p.m.) and *The Forces' Radio Program* (Mondays 8 p.m.).<sup>24</sup>

No information has been found to suggest that the BESA Committee ever received advice from elsewhere regarding the content of shows. Certainly there was a sensitivity to the possibility that acts, particularly comedians, might be tempted to court the favour of troops by lowering the tone. It was a fine line to tread. Near the front line the audiences were all-male and often fatigued in mind and body. BESA decided they did not need intellectual uplifting but rather a couple of hours when fun and music released the tensions. As a precaution, however, the unit Welfare Officer completed a post-show report that gave an opportunity to voice concerns and criticism.<sup>25</sup>

It became clear soon after the first show that plays and 'variety' would be the two formats that would bring the best returns. The plan demanded that the Theatre would be open throughout the year with only a two or three week break (taken when temperatures were at their highest) for repair and refurbishment. A different straight play was to be staged every month and would be interspersed with a larger number of shows categorised roughly as *variety-revue-concert*



*party-music hall-musical*. Runs would be for one week, although the Committee did not hesitate to extend the run of a successful show. Touring versions of a show emerged from the run at the Calcutta Theatre. The Theatre expected to make a profit to fund BESA activities. Other Ranks were charged 8 annas (4p) whilst Officers had to pay 2 rupees (15p) with each being allowed to bring one friend at the same rates. Commendably, BESA declined to have separate seating areas for Officers and O.R.s. Each had to book and reserve seats as available. Thus, the Theatre was the administrative headquarters, the workshop, the rehearsal room, and the cash generator but was always viewed as underpinning the essential role of BESA—to send out touring parties.

More than a quarter of a million patronised the Theatre, August 1942-September 1944, and to this must be added the large numbers entertained at the thirty local venues within easy reach of Calcutta—hospitals, convalescent homes and camps—who each received regular visits, often during afternoons. The books balanced and a debt-free organisation was handed over to ENSA in October 1944.

### *Treading the Calcutta Boards*

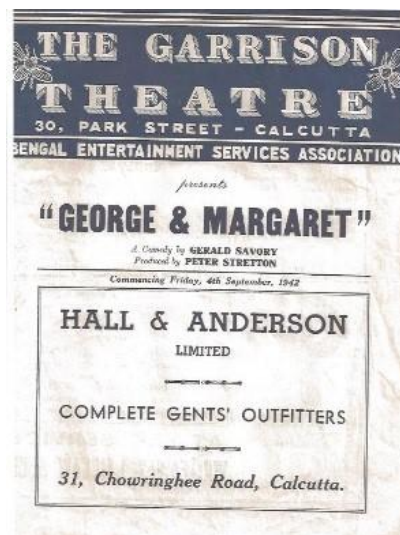


Figure 3. The first play to be staged at the BESA Theatre. It opened on September 4 1942. In the cast was Lennard Pearce, later to find British TV fame in “Only Fools And Horses.”

A full list of plays presented at the BESA Theatre is given in **Appendix 2**: twenty-nine plays in as many months points to concerted effort. But the pressures did not rest entirely on one individual’s shoulders. Peter Stretton, recruited from the R.A.F, had repertory experience in England. He produced *George & Margaret* and took a leading role, a pattern that was repeated with *French Without Tears*, *If Four Walls Told* and *The Shining Hour*, before he was

recalled to his unit and disappeared from the BESA story. Stretton's plays had parts for local actresses whilst the male roles were played by servicemen.



Figure 4. Peter Stretton, one of the three original BESA recruits, is seen here in character for his role in *If Four Walls Told*.



Figure 5. Aircraftman Stephen Ward and civilian actress Phoebe Douglass took the leading roles in *French Without Tears*.

When Stretton left, Flying Officer Sandford Gorton was appointed production manager. Gorton had considerable English stage experience and went on to produce BESA plays such as *Charley's Aunt*, *The Black Eye* and *Night Must Fall*. The important innovation, however, was that encouragement was given to the Amateur Dramatic Society of Calcutta (ADS) to suggest suitable plays, cast them and stage them at the BESA Theatre. It was an important step. ADS had three or four very capable producers. By the end of 1942 their ideas were

beginning to take shape. Thus at any one time Sandford Gorton would know that a number of plays were in rehearsal and a monthly presentation was assured. There was no strict demarcation in the casts. Plays originating from ADS<sup>26</sup> would include servicemen when a particular actor was available and suited the part. Thus the roll-call of BESA plays is testimony to civilian-services co-operation and produced a fascinating blend of personnel. The Elsdon-Smiths, wife and husband, produced three plays. Tom Dart, a curate at Calcutta Cathedral, was responsible for two, whilst F. O. Gorton entered into fruitful co-operation with Ian Vallentine, a local headmaster, for joint productions such as *Candida*, *The Doctor's Dilemma* and *Squaring The Circle*. The pooling of ideas and expertise enabled BESA to deliver on time. The theatre must have been a hive of activity.

Of course, for every play three other shows were needed to complete a monthly program. The other shows are not easy to categorise. All had some musical content and a few, such as *Mainly Music*, almost entirely a music program with the compere cracking jokes as he introduced items. Many included lots of song and dance numbers, reflecting the interest in Hollywood musicals and the dancing of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Some tended more to revue structure and included scripted sketches whilst others preferred a sequenced series of acts in the Variety mode. Singers, comedians (36 in total) and dancers predominated, backed up by two dance bands, the *BESA Band* and the *BESA Theatre Orchestra*. The bands rotated tour work and playing the Theatre. The latter could be pit work or featured numbers on stage. The variety shows often included a novelty act and the diversity of these may surprise since all were recruited from Servicemen stationed in Bengal. Performers included eccentric dancers, a juggler, a contortionist, clowns in traditional make-up and a black-faced comedian, a ventriloquist, impersonators and impressionists, a lightning sketch artist, a magician and illusionist, a hypnotist and a stock whip cowboy.



Figure 6. An original BESA poster from August 1944.

The above poster announces a second-birthday show in 1944. The longer than average cast list is headed by the Theatre Orchestra assisted by civilian vocalist, Diana Whitburn. Illustrative of BESA's commitment to give its customers choice, August 1944 also saw a production of Shaw's *Pygmalion*, *Jungle Jinks* ( a pre-tour try-out together with an R.A.F. choir), and *Slipstream* (fast moving entertainment).



*Figure 7. A scene from the revue Eve an' Now. Unusually for BESA there was a satirical edge to the show as exemplified here by the depiction of Eamon de Valera, Irish Taoiseach, in a sketch entitled 'Neutrality.'*



**CAPTAIN ROSS PARKER**

*Figure 8. Ross Parker appeared in three BESA shows. He is best-known as a song writer being credited with the rousing *There'll Always Be An England* and *We'll Meet Again*, made famous by Vera Lynn.*

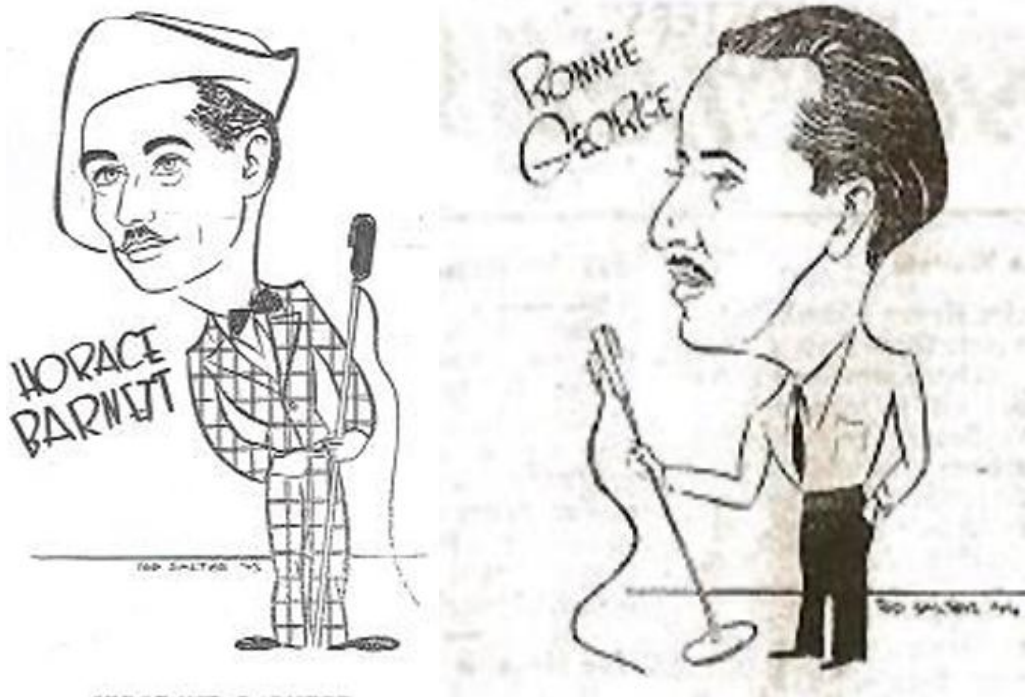


Figure 9a & 9b. Ted Salter caricatures of two BESA performers: comedian Horace Barnett, in a cheekie-chappie pose, reached his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2013. He has many tales to tell of his experiences touring with a Miniature company. Ronnie George was an impressionist and a skilled compere. He was in charge when Vera Lynn gave her BESA concert in April 1944.

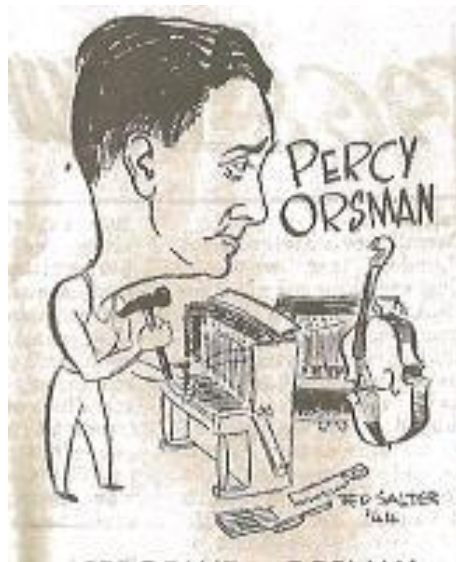
Although **Appendix 3** lists the fifty-five shows (other than plays) that were presented at the BESA Theatre, it does not include the annual pantomimes presented by the Calcutta Amateur Theatrical Society, a feature of pre-war Christmas celebrations for the expatriate community. Successfully transferring to the BESA Theatre, *Aladdin* (1942) and *Sinbad the Sailor* (1943), completed two-week runs. The cast was largely civilian with a jute mill manager revelling in his annual role as dame. The quality of the productions was raised several notches by the pit music of the BESA Theatre Orchestra.

Little attempt was made to send British stage stars to BESA. In 1942 there was so much uncertainty, the sea routes were dangerous, the Indian sub-continent was so far away and harboured a testing climate and lurking health risks. *ENSA* avoided all contact until late 1943 and only assumed responsibility for troop entertainment in late 1944. Its attitude contributed to the 'forgotten army' tag. The arrival of a handful of well-known names was greeted with enthusiasm. Elsie and Doris Waters, *Gert and Daisy*, arrived in early 1944 along with the Bradford comedian, *Stainless Stephen*. They performed in Calcutta and toured extensively. Dame Vera Lynn spent four months in India. *Easter Parade* was running at the BESA Theatre and she made guest appearances at the two

houses on Saturday, April 15, 1944. Her subsequent tour took her to some tricky locations and earned her deserved plaudits.<sup>27</sup> Noel Coward arrived in Calcutta in July 1944 by the direct invitation of the Supreme Commander S.E. Asia, Lord Louis Mountbatten. He gave two performances with his customary aplomb on Saturday, July 8, 1944. Pre-publicity stressed that both shows were for 'allied other ranks and merchant seamen only,'<sup>28</sup> a dictation of terms perhaps intended to stress his independence from military or any other control.

### ***Music, Music, Music***

Fifty musicians played in the two BESA bands from 1942 to 1944. Music was in all the BESA shows from first to last. The standard was high. Many had been full-time professionals in pre-war Britain and they were joined by the part-time pro's, musicians who had played in village halls and church halls on Saturday evenings. The former were technically more proficient but the part-timers' experiences playing dozens of different venues proved valuable when facing the vicissitudes of Indian touring. Calcutta had several shops where equipment and music could be purchased but supplies were often limited. If you played saxophone or clarinet then searching for reeds for your instrument became a constant chore.



*Figure 10. Percy Orsman played bass but also did running repairs to the instruments, particularly the pianos that required frequent re-tuning due to temperature and humidity fluctuations.*

Music was in short supply (as were scripts for plays). The latest numbers were filched from gramophone records and turned into band parts, courtesy of the Association's talented arrangers. Initially, the music played was standard ballroom fare sometimes using a violin to sweeten the melody. Increasingly the influence of swing and American big bands was reflected in the choice of numbers. In the Theatre, BESA bands played as nine or ten piece outfits, with two or three fewer when on tour. It came as a shock to BESA's musicians when

an American Army band, guesting for one evening, fielded a seventeen-piece band.



*Figure 11. 14th April 1943, the Theatre Orchestra on stage. Leader Bert Valentine stands next to civilian vocalist, Kay Evans.*



*Figure 12. An open-air concert in the grounds of a military hospital, probably Loreto Convent that had been requisitioned for that purpose.*

### *A Thousand Miles To Curtain-Up*

The *BESA Buzzin'* show ended a highly successful three week run in early September 1942. It was replaced by a three-act comedy, *George and Margaret*, that had done well in the West End and was made into a film in 1940. Some of the *BESA Buzzin'* cast had been recalled to their units but the nucleus of the band had been retained and a touring show was built around them. *Band Wagon* went on the road to the Chittagong area of Bengal, south-east of Calcutta. They were, as the BESA Bulletin described them, 'pioneers who had a rough time of it.' Their experiences paved the way for twenty-nine more touring shows that set out to visit every nook and cranny of eastern India that might hide an Allied base.

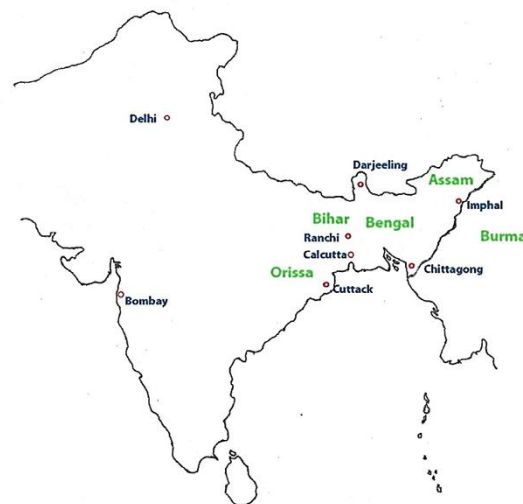


Figure 13. BESA territory. Troops landing at Bombay faced a four-day train journey to travel the 1200 miles to Calcutta.

The main circuit consisted of three areas: Chittagong and the South-East, Ranchi and the West, Assam and the North-East and could be completed in 27 weeks by one of the larger touring companies. This circumnavigation would be interrupted by a weekend in Calcutta for repairs, replacements, and refreshment before switching to another area and continuing. The Forward Areas were accessible only by the small mobile units termed '*Miniatures*' and demanded 20 weeks of touring time.

Some of the touring shows listed in **Appendix 4** also had a run at the BESA Theatre. This was found to be a useful precursor by fine tuning a production for the demands of an extended tour. Of the thirty touring shows listed in Appendix 4 only one is a straight play. BESA never gave up hopes of sending plays out on tour but the lessons learned when *Baby Mine* visited the Chittagong area in December 1942 were a reality check. The play had potential, a farcical comedy with a strong cast, but all plays had to face some critical



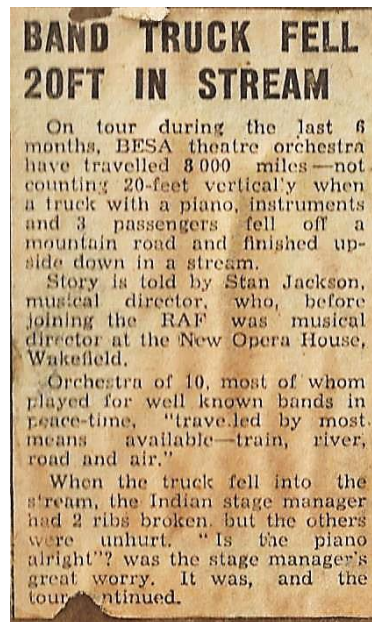
difficulties. A few venues in the target areas might boast theatre facilities but the majority did not, providing only, on a descending scale, mess hall, thatched basha or jungle clearing. Song and dance shows were adaptable and not dependent upon lighting and scenery to create the necessary ambience. Casting a play could be a problem because older actresses might agree to a part in a Calcutta production but not to a tour. Finally, the 'variety' show had inbuilt versatility and resilience in the face of losing members of the company to illness—a constant threat. Turns could be given more time or could be improvised. Musicians could switch instruments and extemporise. Actors and actresses, however, were locked in the straightjacket of a script and were without the safety-net of travelling understudies.<sup>29</sup> Faced with insoluble problems in the short term, BESA decided to play safe and concentrate on song and dance shows.



Figure 14. *Life on the road; some of the cast of the revue Ballyhoo 'backstage' (1943).*

The numbers of touring shows out on the road at any one time rose quickly.<sup>30</sup> The distances travelled were huge. Ranchi and the industrial cities of Bihar were the nearest at 250 miles. Cuttack in Orissa, is 300 miles from Calcutta and Chiittagong in East Bengal about 450. It was 400 miles north to reach the mountains and rest camps in Darjeeling (see figure 13). The heavily burdened railway system provided the long distance travel. Often a reserved coach would be hitched to an express then uncoupled in a tour area and shunted into a siding. There it would act as mess and dormitory as the company visited nearby camps. To go near the front lines to the far north-east not only meant double the distance (Imphal was 940 miles from Calcutta) but also crossing the Brahmaputra river. No railway bridge meant that cast and baggage had to be loaded onto a ferry then re-loaded onto the narrow gauge railway that carried them to the major base at Dimapur. From there on it was by road, a road notorious for its hazards and difficult driving conditions. To arrive at any of the bases in the forward areas was an achievement in itself. Inevitably more time was spent travelling than entertaining. The show *Spice of Variety* left Calcutta on

September 20, 1943 to tour Assam and Manipur, including Kohima and Imphal. It returned on December 15, 1943. The return journey had taken four days. The company managed to present 62 shows whilst travelling for 87 days.<sup>31</sup>



*Figure 15a & 15 b. The touring motto was 'be prepared for the unexpected.' It could be a snake in the billet (dealt with by the Indian bearers), or the camp being kept awake by a prowling tiger that removed two goats from a pen (Imphal, January 10 1943). The images above refer to a truck journey (October 3 1943) near Shillong and rail travel disrupted by a typhoon (Kharagpur, 1942).*

Accommodation and food were always hit and miss. Some shows were at American bases where the meals provided and messing conditions made British welfare efforts seem second-rate. With living conditions so primitive and year-round exposure to the climate, it is unsurprising that sickness rates in the BESA ranks were high. BESA Bulletin (December 1942–September 1944) mentions thirty Servicemen leaving shows, most being hospitalised. It is known that this was the tip of the iceberg, and it seems unlikely that anybody escaped unscathed.<sup>32</sup> Wherever possible, replacements would be sent from Calcutta. Whilst waiting for them to arrive the shows carried on, improvising as necessary.

### *Fauji Dilkush Sabha (FDS)*

Meanwhile a similar system had been set up to entertain Indian troops. December 1942 saw the first show, *Oriental Highlights*, begin to tour. In February 1943, BESA established a sub-committee, the *Indian Advisory Committee*, with the brief to recruit Indian performers and assemble shows. The *Advisory Committee* quickly found that cultural, religious and language factors<sup>33</sup> made the job extremely problematic but Sim's 14<sup>th</sup> Army was 70% H. M. Indian Forces and had equal morale and entertainment needs.

Entertainers were not found in the ranks of the Indian troops in sufficient numbers. Shows could only be produced with the help of professional performers. This posed a dilemma for BESA with its tight financial structure, however help came from Army Welfare which agreed to fund Indian entertainment. BESA began to assemble touring companies. By August 1943, four shows were out and eventually this rose to eight. The arrival of ENSA in early 1944 prompted a major re-appraisal of the entertainment provision for the Indian troops. ENSA, already uneasy about taking over the entertainment of British troops, balked at adding to its responsibilities. It was clear that BESA had reached the limit of its organisational resources and the Government had to step in. There followed the formation of an organisation named Fauji Dilkush Sabha (FDS), which roughly translates as "Shows To Give Soldiers Happy Hearts." A British Colonel was appointed Controller and established an office in Park Street, Calcutta, directly opposite the BESA Theatre. By the end of 1944 FDS had thirty companies touring across the whole of India. By the end of the War FDS companies also could be found in Burma, Ceylon, Italy, Greece and the Middle East with audiences topping one million per month.



*Figure 16. Four dancers from the Indian show Aslem's Concert Party. This show later toured in Italy.*

### ***Where No Lady Artists Can Be Accommodated***

The BESA *Miniatures*, perhaps, were the Association's finest achievement. Usually six-strong, a *Miniature* travelled light with the minimum of equipment. The all-male company had to be versatile and durable for it went, as the Association quaintly announced 'where no lady artists can be accommodated,' that is, as near the front line as possible in territory, by Army regulation, out of bounds to women.

Large touring shows were a characteristic feature throughout BESA's existence but by late 1943 there was a realisation that there were limits to their usefulness. On average the complement was about fifteen including musicians, entertainers, transport and stage managers. To this were added costumes and simple back-drops and an amplification system. Reaching isolated camps meant lorries were required beyond the rail terminus. As the terrain became more challenging, in proximity to the front line, so the cumbersome larger shows struggled to reach their destinations. BESA, characteristically, speedily implemented modifications, slimming down some shows so that all parts of Allied-held territory could be visited.

Enter the *Miniature*. Ideally, a few multi-talented performers gave short shows, about an hour long, several times a day to small gatherings of front-line fighters. They were daytime shows. Common sense dictated that large gatherings at evening shows with artificial lighting would be an open invitation to Japanese shelling. The program would contain the BESA essentials—music, dance and laughter. There would be musicians (accordion or harmonium, guitar or fiddle), singers, comedians and occasionally a speciality act, with one of the group stepping forward as compere. Often the boundaries were blurred: comedians would sing, singers would take part in slap-stick routines. Untrammelled by the scripts, set pieces and staging of the larger touring shows, they found it easy to go with the mood of the audience, often finishing with a sing-along.

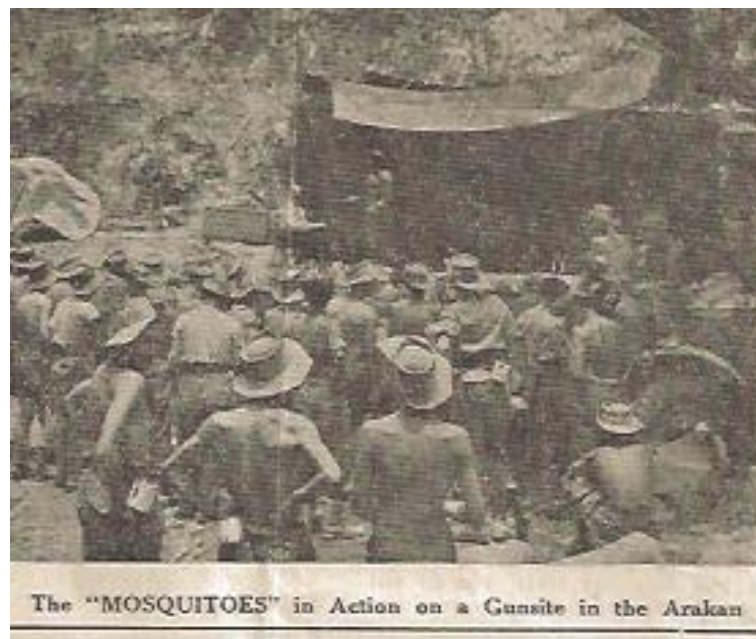
There are many hair-raising tales: of sniper bullets ping-pong across a stage, of audiences melting away to man guns, and of transport jeeps taking wrong turnings and unwittingly heading into Japanese territory. One *Miniature* gave a concert at 8000 feet above sea level—the highest gunsite in the world, claimed the *BESA Bulletin*. The *Greenflies Miniature* was flown into the Imphal defensive 'box' during the epic siege in 1944.

With the *Miniatures* BESA's statement of intent came to fruition. The companies—*Grasshoppers*, *Mosquitoes*, *Greenflies*, *Roosters*, *Costers*, *Stand Easy* and *Jungle Jinks*—provided simple entertainment where it was most needed. Their efforts were characterised by outdoor settings, rudimentary props, informality, audience participation, sentimental links with families and British customs and places, a certain bawdiness mixed with slap-stick, and perhaps the "ladies." The "ladies" were not the BESA Belles, denied participation, but female impersonators, drag artistes, such as 'Yvette' and 'Patricia.' One can guess at the

psychological needs they addressed, however it is undeniable that they were hugely popular and sources of great hilarity.

The *Miniatures* received praise and plaudits for travelling and performing in conditions more severe than experienced by any other entertainment unit. It was the commitment to the task that endeared *Miniatures'* personnel to the average squaddie. Their commanders, too, were well aware of the benefits:

I should like to congratulate the BESA Executive Committee, its members and all the artists upon their splendid achievements. In particular I would like to thank the Miniature parties which have toured so regularly among Divisions and forward troops, under jungle conditions during difficult monsoon months. Many units have depended upon BESA Miniature Parties for their sole entertainment, and the success with which they have toured is a very great credit to them. Lieut. General Sir W. J. Slim, G.O.C. in C. 14th Army.<sup>34</sup>



*Figure 17. The Mosquitoes perform at one of the many shows given during their gruelling eight-week tour of the Arakan (1944).*



Figure 18. *The Greenflies Miniature company was formed in March 1944 and featured 'Yvette.'*

### ♪ *Now Is The Hour . . .* ♪

Time was beginning to run out for BESA. Self-funding was not sustainable for an organisation with its extensive commitments. The organisation could have been strengthened and expanded with a large injection of Government resources. The spadework had been done and the BESA philosophy could have been retained. It was decided, however, that ENSA should take over the reins. A suggestion that was received with lukewarm enthusiasm by both parties.<sup>35</sup> In late 1943 a Colonel was despatched from ENSA's Middle East headquarters to carry out a fact-finding mission. Others arrived to assist him and BESA's Calcutta facilities were inspected in mid-1944. Plans were laid and the BESA Committee formally handed over control on October 1, 1944. BESA Servicemen became ENSA Servicemen. The shows continued performing at the (re-named) ENSA Garrison Theatre in Calcutta; others continued touring with the same billing but under the ENSA banner. ENSA Officers (including one destined to become a famous post-war film actor)<sup>36</sup> moved into the ACES (BESA) offices.

It is ironic that the hand-over to ENSA took place on October 1 1944, for on that same date General Slim issued orders for the advance over the Chindwin river.<sup>37</sup> The 14<sup>th</sup> Army had thrown back the Japanese at Imphal and Kohima changing the whole complexion of the conflict. Crossing the Chindwin was the start of the great fight-back. The preparation and recuperation time was over and so, in an important sense, ENSA had missed the boat. BESA had been there when entertainment was most needed.

### ***Seventy Years On***

The Bengal Entertainment Services Association occupies a special place in the list of British World War 2 entertainment enterprises. It was independently-funded; only Mobile Entertainments for the Southern Area (MESA), the brain-child of a theatre owner who underwrote the five shows that toured England's southern counties, was free of either NAAFI or Government support.<sup>38</sup> BESA would have also approved of MESA's intention to play all bases in Southern Command, no matter how small the audience.

BESA was dissimilar in other important respects from ENSA, the Army's *Stars in Battle Dress* and RAF *Gang Shows*. The first employed civilian performers, the other two consisted entirely of Services personnel. Uniquely, BESA blended civilians and Servicemen into a harmonious whole that managed to answer the call for troop entertainment when the need was greatest. This entertainment included shows for Indian Servicemen resulting directly in the formation of the successful Fauji Dilkush Sabha organisation. All this was played against the back-drop of a territory nearly three times the size of Britain with a climate of extremes. There were three-day train journeys, lorry rides slithering along narrow tracks, leeches and mosquitoes, sleeping rough, basic rations, and the nausea and diarrhoea of dengue fever. The welcome they received, however, more than compensated for the discomforts. In Calcutta, the Theatre buzzed with activity: band rehearsals in the morning, set construction and painting, play readings and nine shows a week with perspiration dripping from audience and performers. The applause was well deserved.

Seventy years have passed since the applause faded. BESA deserves to be remembered, particularly for its tenaciously held belief that entertainment should be taken as far forward in the battle zone as possible. After seventy years the validity of that tenet holds, as a recent study confirms:

Entertainment is a morale sustaining factor. Its provision has to be perceived as equitable and fair. Disproportionate delivery to rear areas causes resentment among front-line troops who experience greater risks.<sup>39</sup>

## *Appendices*

### *Appendix 1*

#### *Analysis of shows at the BESA Theatre, Calcutta, August 1942-September 1944*

Variety/Revue	56
Plays	29
Boxing Tournaments	6
Indian Troops' Shows	5
Recitals	2

### *Appendix 2*

#### *Plays Presented At The BESA Theatre 1942-1944*

Titles in **red** are plays instigated by the Amateur Dramatic Club (ADC) of Calcutta

#### **1942**

George and Margaret:	(Gerald Savory, 1937)
French Without Tears:	(Terence Rattigan, 1936)
The Two Mrs Carrolls:	(Martin Vale, 1935)
If Four Walls Told:	(Edward Percy, 1922)
<b>Lovers Leap:</b>	(Philip Johnson, 1934)

#### **1943**

Rope:	(Patrick Hamilton, 1929)
<b>Dear Brutus:</b>	(J.M. Barrie, 1917)
<b>Private Lives:</b>	(Noel Coward, 1930)
The Shining Hour:	(Keith Winter, 1934)
Candida:	(George Bernard Shaw)

#### **1943**

<b>Love From A Stranger:</b>	(adaptation of Agatha Christie story by Frank Vosper, 1936)
Youth At The Helm:	(Paul Vulpius, 1934, translated from German)
The Doctor's Dilemma:	(George Bernard Shaw, 1906)
<b>Arms And The Man:</b>	(George Bernard Shaw, 1894)
<b>Outward Bound:</b>	(Sutton Vane, 1923)
A Man With Red Hair:	(adaptation of Hugh Walpole novel by Ben Wolf Levy, 1928)
A Marriage Has Been Arranged:	(Alfred Sutro, 1904)
<b>Tonight at 8.30:</b>	(Noel Coward, 1935)



**1944**

Charley's Aunt:	(Brandon Thomas, 1894)
Flare Path:	(Terence Rattigan, 1941)
<b>Ten Minute Alibi:</b>	(Anthony Armstrong, 1935)
<b>Nine Till Six:</b>	(Aimee & Philip Stuart, 1930)
Squaring The Circle:	(Valentin Katayev, 1928)
<b>Lovers Leap:</b>	(Philip Johnson, 1934)
The Black Eye:	(James Bridie, 1935)
<b>The Late Christopher Bean:</b>	(adaptation of a French work by Emlyn Williams, 1933)
<b>Night Must Fall:</b>	(Emlyn Williams, 1935)
Pygmalion:	(George Bernard Shaw, 1912)
The Dover Road:	(A.A. Milne, 1921)

**Appendix 3*****Shows Presented At The BESA Theatre 1942-1944***

<b>1942</b> BESA Buzzin'	<b>1943</b> Eve an' Now
Andy Gemmell's Variety	Mild 'n Bitter
Band Wagon	Mild 'n Bitter 2 <sup>nd</sup> Ed.
Ballyhoo	Old and New Faces
Ballyhoo 2 <sup>nd</sup> . Ed.	Mixture as Before
Our Cabaret	Commandoes Concert Party
	Mainly Music
	Going Places
	Sunday Night at 9
	Flying High
	Band Parade
	Road Show No. 1
	BESA Crazy
<b>1944</b> Happy Return	Sunday Night at 9 2 <sup>nd</sup> . Ed.
Whoopee	Grand Variety Music Hall
Fun in the Fare	Spice of Variety
Mirth and Melody	American Sunday Night
Radio Red Cross Variety	Music Hall
BESA Panics	Transatlantic Hook-Up
Easter Parade	Monsoon Capers
Laughtime	Blitzes Concert Party
All the Winners	Fun'sapoppin
At Your Service	Raflctions
Noel Coward Show	Aces High
Variety Parade	Vaudeville

Jungle Jinks  
 Slipstream  
 Swingtime  
 BESA Birthday  
 Pot Luck  
 Chindits Calling

Grasshoppers Miniature  
 Bow Bells Music Hall  
 Hilarity Express  
 Tune Parade  
 The Comets  
 Tune Parade revival

**Appendix 4**  
**Touring Shows 1942-1944**

**1942**

Band Wagon  
 Ballyhoo  
 Our Cabaret  
 Baby Mine (a play)

**1944**

Swingtime  
 Roosters Miniature  
 Whoopee  
 Greenflies Miniature  
 Leave It To You  
 Stand Easy Miniature  
 Costers Miniature  
 Variety Parade  
 BESA Theatre Orchestra.  
 Jungle Jinks Miniature.

**1943**

Eve 'an Now  
 Rise and Smile  
 Mainly Music  
 Music Hall  
 Commandoes Concert Party  
 Flying High  
 Spice of Variety  
 Chins Up  
 Fun'sapoppin  
 Blitzes Concert Party  
 Jungle Funfare  
 Grasshoppers' Miniature  
 Bow Bells Music Hall  
 Hilarity Express  
 Comets Concert Party  
 Mosquitoes Miniature

**Appendix 5**  
**Numbers of Touring Shows**

1942 September	1
1942 December	5
1943 April	8
1943 December	10
1944 March	11
1944 July	9

- <sup>1</sup> In soldier slang at the time, to be 'beyond the blue' meant to be in the front-lines facing the Japanese. The origin of the saying is believed to be the apposite line in the popular Jeanette Macdonald song (1930: lyrics Robin, music Whiting & Harling).
- <sup>2</sup> *BESA Bulletin* no. 88, October 1944. The weekly *BESA Bulletin* (BB) publicised shows and gave news of the entertainers. Issue no. 1 appeared on December 21, 1942 and the run concluded with a large souvenir edition, no.88, on October 1, 1944.
- <sup>3</sup> Field Marshal Viscount Slim, *Defeat Into Victory* (Basingstoke & Oxford: Pan Books, 1999), 182.
- <sup>4</sup> Slim, *Defeat Into Victory*, 190.
- <sup>5</sup> See L. J. Collins, *Theatre at War 1914-1918* (Basingstoke & London: Macmillan Press, 1998 and New York, St Martin's Press, 1998). J. G. Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies 1914-1918* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990).
- <sup>6</sup> Basil Dean, *The Theatre at War* (London: Harrap, 1956), 30-40.
- <sup>7</sup> Other perspectives of World War 2 troop entertainment are given by John Graven Hughes, *The Greaspaint War: Showbusiness 1939-45* (London: New English Library, 1976), Andy Merriman, *Greaspaint & Cordite: The story of ENSA and Concert Party entertainment during the Second World War*, (London, Aurum Press, 2013).
- <sup>8</sup> Andy Merriman, 280.
- <sup>9</sup> There were some remarkable achievements. For example, for four years Margaret Martyn and her band of women expatriates ran a leave hostel in race course buildings belonging to the Royal Calcutta Turf Club. Margaret Martyn, *They Passed Through* (Calcutta: Essco Press, 1946).
- <sup>10</sup> Glimpses of the life and times of British expatriate businessmen, the *box-wallahs*, in the last days of the Raj are provided in Sir Owen Jenkins' interesting book: Sir Owen Jenkins, *Merchant Prince* (Putney, London: BACSA, 1987). The Chairman of BESA, William Tully, combined his work in the commercial sector of Calcutta with his war-time role. A fascinating account of the lifestyle of the man at BESA's helm is given in an article written by his son, Sir Mark Tully (author and broadcaster). Mark Tully, "My Father's Raj," *Granta* 57 (Spring 1997): 140-145.
- <sup>11</sup> H. C. Walters & W. S. C Tully, article on the Bengal Entertainment Services Association, Imperial War Museum Documents 5397 (1977), 1.
- <sup>12</sup> Ian Stephens, *Monsoon Morning* (London: Ernest Benn, 1966), 146.
- <sup>13</sup> The role of expatriate women in India during World War 2 is a topic ripe for further research. Godden's survey is the most comprehensive. A variety of insights can be obtained from Rumer Godden, *Bengal Journey* (Calcutta: Longmans Green, 1945), Patt Barr, *The Dust In The Balance: British Women in India 1905-1945* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989), Eugene Fraser, *A House By The Hooghly: A Jute Wallah's Wife* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 1989), Margaret Martyn, *Married to the Raj* (London: BACSA, 1992).
- <sup>14</sup> Rumer Godden, *Bengal Journey*, 89, estimated at 6500.
- <sup>15</sup> A. G. & M. Stavridi Papers, Centre of South Asia Studies, Cambridge University. Margaret, the wife of a British railway engineer, was a talented costume and set designer who assisted with early BESA productions. Her papers include her description of BESA Theatre activity, and her appraisal of civilians war work in Calcutta and Bengal.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, newspaper cutting, source unknown, but probably the *Statesman* (Calcutta).
- <sup>17</sup> Laurence Neal papers (private): scrapbook, reminiscences, 73 editions of *BESA Bulletin*.
- <sup>18</sup> See Appendix 1.
- <sup>19</sup> Jorn Weingartner, *The Arts as a Weapon of War: Britain and the Shaping of National Morale* (London & New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 2006), 41.
- <sup>20</sup> Martin Pugh, *We Danced All Night: A Social History Of Britain Between The Wars* (London: Vintage Books, 2009), 229. 990 million cinema tickets were sold in 1939.
- <sup>21</sup> Bill Green papers (private) include diaries, scrapbook and memorabilia documenting his service in BESA/ENSA 1942-1945; Bill's time as a musician was divided between playing at the BESA Theatre and touring. In his off-duty time he went to a film show 209 times, mainly in Calcutta.
- <sup>22</sup> Pugh, *We Danced All Night*, 232. The numbers of BBC licence holders rose from 36,000 in 1922 to 8.8 million in 1939.
- <sup>23</sup> Laurence Neal papers: Laurence Neal took part in more than a dozen radio plays receiving Rs.20 (rupees) for a 30 minute play. At that time Rs.20 equated to 30/- (shillings), about half a weekly wage for a manual worker in Britain.

<sup>24</sup> BB no.6, 25<sup>th</sup> January 1943.

<sup>25</sup> ENSA had been criticised in the British press for allowing vulgarity in its shows. BESA entertainers received written warning that 'no gags or extraneous matter may be introduced in any performances which must be kept strictly to the script' (January 1943). It is doubtful that the later *Miniature* companies could, or would, conform to this edict.

<sup>26</sup> Marked in red in Appendix 2.

<sup>27</sup> Dame Vera Lynn, *Some Sunny Day* (London: Harper 2009), 170-191.

<sup>28</sup> BB no. 75, 1<sup>st</sup> July 1944.

<sup>29</sup> ENSA quickly was introduced to the demands of tours in India. Typical is Doreen Hawkins account of the termination of a touring version of Coward's *Private Lives* as the climate took its toll. Doreen Hawkins, *Drury Lane to Dimapur* (Wimborne Minster: Dove Press, 2009), 137.

<sup>30</sup> See Appendix 5.

<sup>31</sup> Bill Green Papers. Some idea of the workload of BESA performers can be obtained from his carefully compiled diaries. He performed 538 times in BESA shows from October 3 1942 until December 31 1944.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* Most, perhaps all, of BESA's personnel suffered some form of tropical illness, many requiring hospitalisation. Bill spent six weeks in hospital in the summer of 1943. His close friend and fellow musician, Wally Brooks, contacted recurrent malaria and was repatriated.

<sup>33</sup> Some idea of the difficulties faced can be obtained from David Atkins' painfully honest account of his experiences commanding 450 Indian troops speaking six different languages. David Atkins, *The Reluctant Major* (Pulborough: Toat Press, 1986), 10.

<sup>34</sup> BB no.88, 1<sup>st</sup> October 1944.

<sup>35</sup> Seasoned BESA comedian, Ivor Owen, disliked the superior airs flaunted by ENSA personnel and accused them of naivety in their choice of material that would entertain the tough soldiers. Richard Fawkes, *Fighting For A Laugh: Entertaining, British And American Armed Forces 1939-1946* (London: Macdonald and Jane, 1978), 168.

<sup>36</sup> Jack Hawkins described his experiences as C.O. of ENSA's Calcutta unit. Jack Hawkins, *Anything For A Quiet Life* (London,:Elm Tree Books, 1973), 69.

<sup>37</sup> Slim, *Defeat Into Victory*, 387.

<sup>38</sup> Fawkes, *Fighting For A Laugh*, 26.

<sup>39</sup> Edgar Jones, *Morale, Psychological Wellbeing of UK Armed Forces and Entertainment: A Report for The British Forces Foundation* (London: Kings College, 2011), 5.