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Captive Audience: Camp Entertainment and British Prisoners-of-War in German Captivity, 1939-1945

*During the World War 2 nearly 200,000 British prisoners of war were held inside the Third Reich. Most of the published narratives and histories focus on their road to captivity and attempts at escape but have often underplayed the importance of activities inside the POW camps, organised by the men themselves to alleviate the drudgery and boredom of everyday life. These included education and sports, but perhaps the most prominent aspect of this was the production of theatrical and musical entertainments—often in the most inhospitable circumstances. This study looks at the extent of such activities and their importance in day-to-day existence, both for officers and ordinary servicemen as they battled with the realities of long-term incarceration. Bob Moore is Professor of Twentieth Century European History at the University of Sheffield. He has published extensively on the history of Western Europe in the mid-twentieth century and has also edited a number of collections, including *Resistance in Western Europe* (2000). His latest monograph, *Survivors: Jewish Self-Help and Rescue in Nazi-Occupied Western Europe* was published by Oxford in 2010. Barbara Hately is Honorary Research Fellow in the History Department at the University of Sheffield. She has published a number of articles on prisoners of war and was co-editor of *Prisoners of War, Prisoners of Peace*, (with Bob Moore, 2005). Her monograph, *War and Welfare: British prisoner-of-war families, 1939-1945*, was published by Manchester University Press in 2009.*

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In British popular culture perceptions of prisoner-of-war life in Germany during World War 2 have been focused almost entirely on escape attempts; an image reinforced by early post-war publications and feature films. This was partly because such exploits were good commercial prospects, but also represented an attempt to rehabilitate the reputation of the many servicemen who had often spent large parts of the war behind barbed wire as captives and played no direct part in the defeat of the Axis. Their activities in escaping and 'goon baiting' could thus be interpreted as working for the Allied cause from behind the lines. However, detailed studies by David Rolf and, more recently, by Paul Mackenzie using contemporary records and interviews have convincingly demonstrated that the majority of British POWs were uninterested in attempting escape and indeed resented those that did, not least because of the punishments inflicted as a result. Yet in spite of this, the popular view of prisoners committed to escaping persists to the present day.¹ By this reading, camp entertainments organised by the men themselves served merely as a backdrop to escape attempts. Whilst it is undoubtedly true that this did happen, it by no means represents the full picture. In fact, contemporary diaries are clear that entertainments, in all their forms, were central to maintaining morale for both officers and other ranks. As Bill Jackson recorded in his diary, seeing the latest show was 'the highlight of our miserable day-to-day existence.'² Harold Mytum has recently developed this argument even further by suggesting that periods of captivity often resulted in a form of institutionalisation which created an 'inward looking world' where culture, crafts and sport created their own identities so that 'the barbed wire and the cramped tents were almost forgotten.'³

Focusing on the British prisoners of war in German hands, this study looks at a sample of less well known POW diaries, memoirs and private papers as well as secondary sources to analyse the rich diversity of theatrical and musical entertainments across the POW camps in the Third Reich, and how they formed an essential part of life in captivity for many thousands of POWs, either as participants or as an audience. The approach adopted here is essentially thematic and examines the rapidity, variety and scale of the entertainments, their existence in both officer and other ranks' camps, the sources of theatre space, costumes, play-books, musical scores and musical instruments together with an assessment of their German captors' attitudes towards POW involvement in such activities. In conclusion it looks at how such entertainments were seen as essential in maintaining morale among prisoners enduring an indeterminate period behind barbed wire.

During the course of World War 2, approximately 200,000 British Imperial servicemen were captured by German forces and committed to prisoner-of-war camps.⁴ They included soldiers, sailors, airmen and merchant seamen who were segregated by service and by rank and distributed between the twenty-one *Wehrkreise* (military districts) in Germany.⁵ Under the terms of article 27 of the 1929 Geneva Convention, neither officers nor N.C.Os could be required to undertake work, although the latter could request deployment if they so wished. Generally, officers were therefore housed in *Offizierslagern* (Oflag) and other ranks in *Stammlagern* (Stalag) although some ordinary soldiers were

accommodated in *Oflags* as orderlies to cater for the needs of the officers. Camps used by the Luftwaffe to house R.A.F. personnel, many of whom were officers, were all designated as *Stalag Luft* whilst all Royal Navy personnel and merchant seamen were housed in *Marlag und Milag Nord* north east of Bremen.⁶ Camps varied considerably in size and could contain several nationalities, although often internally segregated. It was also the case that prisoners were moved between camps. For other ranks, this was to facilitate their use as a labour force, but even officers were sometimes transferred at the whim of the captors. Thus for example, the famous Oflag IVC at Colditz was used to house habitual escapees and *Prominente*, those whom the Germans regarded as having high standing with the Allies.⁷

The 1929 Geneva Convention said very little about how prisoners might divert themselves from the realities of interminable incarceration except for article 17, which stipulated that 'so far as possible belligerents shall encourage intellectual diversions and sports organized by prisoners of war.'⁸ Leisure time for prisoners in *Stalags* was perforce limited by their use as labour and their increasing deployment in small detachments away from camps. However, for the officers incarcerated inside *Oflags*, the reverse was true with almost unlimited time to kill. They had no opportunity to leave the camps and it was only a reciprocal agreement initiated by the British in August 1942 that provided for officers to give their parole to 'take walks, collect wood, garden and perform other similar activities' for a maximum of two hours a week.⁹ For the most part, British prisoners in German hands were treated in accordance with the terms of the Geneva Convention, albeit with some notable exceptions. German claims that British troops had tied the hands of captives during the raids on Dieppe and Sark in August and October 1942 respectively led to the so-called 'shackling crisis' where POWs on both sides were kept in chains for periods of time.¹⁰ Later in the war, the mass escape from Stalag Luft III (Sagan) led to an increased SS, SD and Gestapo involvement in prisoner affairs, with a concomitant worsening of conditions and greater threats to POW security.

The first major German captures of British POWs took place as the British Expeditionary Force in France was forced to retreat. While many were rescued in the evacuation from Dunkirk, some 40,000 men in rear-guard units and those trapped at St. Valéry were left behind. These men were marched into Germany and there accommodated in camps spread across the country.¹¹ While other ranks were soon put to work by their captors, perhaps the most surprising feature of the *Oflags* was the speed with which musical and theatrical entertainments were organised. For example, officers captured at Dunkirk and sent to Oflag VIIC (Laufen) recorded the first entertainment on 30 June 1940; within a month of their capture and perhaps only days after their arrival. This involved Toc H members who had formed a choir to sing at meetings and church services but less than two weeks later a theatre had been cleared and permission obtained for its use.¹² The first classical piano recital by Captain Henry Coombe-Tennant followed on 1 August and the first 'straight' play, John Galsworthy's *Escape*, opened on 4 December with a cast enhanced by some professional actors.¹³ Although this involved only small numbers of performers at the outset,

more elaborate productions were soon being planned that required not only thespians but also the practical talents of (among others) carpenters, electricians and tailors. In this way, larger numbers of men became directly involved at a time when books were in short supply and other amusements and pastimes were thin on the ground. This same impetus to plan entertainments as soon as was practical could be seen when numbers of British officers were transferred to Oflag VIB Dössel in Westphalia. There was an immediate attempt to 'start with entertainments' with an entertainments committee and sub-committees for music and theatre. The first variety programme took place only five days after their arrival and included songs with guitar, magic, a violin solo and impressions as well as a number of sketches.¹⁴ However, this may not have been entirely typical as David Rolf records that in Stalag Luft I there was little activity beyond sports in the first year of its existence, although it too eventually generated a range of 'concerts, recitals and film shows.'¹⁵

The ability of prisoners to rehearse and produce concerts and shows was in no small part down to the attitudes of their captors. Initial German reticence was soon overcome when they realised that 'entertainment was necessary and that photographs in Red Cross magazines of prisoners enjoying themselves made good propaganda.'¹⁶ Thus in addition to meeting their responsibilities to article 17 of the Geneva Convention, the German authorities were usually eager to find harmless diversions for idle hands and thus were prepared to co-operate with plans to build camp theatres and provide materials for productions. As Lieutenant Coles RNVR incarcerated at Marlag (O) Westertimke noted:

There were times when the Germans wanted us – within limits – to keep occupied doing innocuous things like arranging concerts, because they imagined we would then have less time for digging tunnels and making life awkward for them.¹⁷

Chronic overcrowding in the first camps often meant that space was at a premium. Private Les Foskett in Stalag 383 recalled the almost immediate adaptation of a stable, where the floor was artificially sloped and a stage constructed from Red Cross crates.¹⁸ Canteens were also adapted so that they could be used for shows but this inevitably restricted the opportunity for rehearsals. Latterly, designated theatre spaces and rehearsal rooms were provided in many officer camps with purpose built stages and seating. Although many resources to equip these theatres could often be found within the camp or in the vicinity, the captives were dependent on outside agencies for other essentials like play texts and musical instruments. Some of the latter came via the Young Men's Christian Association (Y.M.C.A.) or International Committee of the Red Cross (I.C.R.C.) while others were purchased locally. In this regard, the officer camps were much better placed as their inmates received pay from the Germans as befitted their rank; an advantage that also extended to the all-important costumes. These were usually made from blankets or uniforms, but on occasion they were hired from outside in spite of some German reservations that they might be used in escape attempts.¹⁹ Other resources were sometimes purloined from the captors. It lent a 'certain zest' to the performances when

officers 'who had that morning conducted an investigation into the loss of 40 light bulbs, some sheets and blankets and a vacuum cleaner, could now espy the missing property merely by looking at the stage.'²⁰ This could be viewed as an extension of the pastime of 'goon-baiting' and attempting to annoy or mislead their German guards, sometimes to cloak escape attempts but sometimes just as an amusement and a contribution to the war effort—however insignificant—and as a 'balm to utter boredom.'²¹

German reservations also sometimes extended to suspicion of the motives for developing certain entertainments. Men from the 51st Highland Division had been captured at Saint Valéry, attempting to fight their way back to Le Havre following the evacuation from Dunkirk, and their officers had been sent to the camp at Laufen. As dancing had always played a part in Scottish military life, classes were initiated in the camp and, in the winter of 1940, three officers, Lieutenant Jimmy Atkinson (Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders), Lieutenant Peter Oliver (4th Seaforth Highlanders) and Lieutenant-Colonel Tom Harris Hunter (51st Division) between them invented a new reel, originally named the Laufen Reel. Lt.-Col. Harris Hunter, who had been Chair of the Perth and Perthshire Branch of the Royal Scottish County Dance Society tried to send a description of the dance to his wife but at first, the German censors viewed the dance notation as a type of code and refused to pass it. Harris Hunter then arranged a demonstration of the dance and managed to persuade the authorities of its innocence. In fact the only part of the dance with a 'hidden' message is the central 16 bars which are designed to represent the Saltire.²² Similarly, the sending of sheet music was often viewed with suspicion that the notes might conceal a hidden code although prisoners were allowed to buy both music and manuscript paper locally.²³

Although the Germans were keen to demonstrate their good treatment of their captives, their beneficence was not unconditional. Escapes were often punished by the closure of theatres and the limiting of other privileges. Thus a show at Laufen in September 1940 had to be relocated to a rehearsal room after the designated theatre building was closed by the Germans. Likewise a production at Dössel was disrupted when its theatre was closed for six weeks in the summer of 1943 after another escape. Other punishments could be equally damaging. Theatre tools purchased by the men at Laufen in January 1941 were confiscated after three weeks, ostensibly because they were being put to illicit use, and at least one Christmas pantomime production was put in jeopardy when the conductor of the orchestra was 'in chains' on the night in question and had to be substituted.²⁴ Perhaps it is no surprise that Bobby Loder recorded a series of incidents at Eichstätt where the Germans curtailed privileges as a result of 'certain discoveries.' During Easter 1942, rehearsals of the *St. Matthew Passion* and parts of Handel's *Messiah* were disrupted when the No. 2 Dining Room was being dug up by the guards, and extensive searches of the No. 1 Dining Room revealed 'an airman or two.' Both were closed by the Germans—as was the theatre. In June of the same year he recalled the disruption to stage productions by the refusal of the German authorities to supply tools to the theatre:

The disappearance of several shovels, followed by the loss of a pair of pliers caused such mental upset to our captors that, with very few exceptions, no tools whatsoever were allowed into the camp for theatrical, mechanical or sanitary needs, and even hand-made garden hoes and forks were in genuine danger of being confiscated.²⁵

In spite of these restrictions, the Germans regularly attended theatre and musical productions. One POW remembered his guards 'sitting spellbound through plays, while revues and pantomimes in which "girls" featured left them simply gaping.'²⁶ In fact, the Kommandant at this camp was so taken with their production of *The Mikado* that he cancelled roll call for three days in its honour rather than interrupt the performances and unusually allowed the singing of 'God Save the King' at the end of each performance 'after the German guests had left the hall.'²⁷ Unfortunately, not all productions received the same degree of approval. In other camps, the Germans banned the singing of *Land of Hope and Glory* and a performance at Stalag Luft VII was halted because the term 'Boche' was used.²⁸ Rather more dramatically, Gunner Robert McBride recalled how at Stalag IXA he found himself 'looking down the barrel of a luger pistol' held by a 'Nazi' officer following a line in which a German officer was referred to as a 'bastard.'²⁹

However, it was the scale, quantity and quality of what was achieved in the camps that are most remarkable. At Laufen alone, after less than six months in residence, the productions during December 1940 were as follows:

1	December	Beethoven Piano Recital
4	"	<i>Escape</i> by John Galsworthy
8,10	"	Light Orchestral Music
11,15	"	Dance Band
12	"	Chamber Music
14, 18	"	Orchestral and Choral Concert
22, 22	"	Dance Music
22, 29	"	Carol Festival
24	"	Carol Sing-Song
26-29, 31	"	Pantomime

There is no doubt that Laufen certainly contained a number of ambitious musicians as their carol concert on this first Christmas in captivity was a recreation of the King's College Chapel Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols. The music and words had to be transcribed from memory and the performance proved so popular that it had to be repeated to meet demand. The festivities also included a large Christmas tree and room decorations in green and silver and Boxing Day was marked not only by the opening night of the Pantomime *Citronella* but also by a football match between the officers and orderlies where the band played as a half-time entertainment.³⁰ Although not recorded in the table above, the pantomime actually ran on into January 1941 eventually numbering 14 performances. As Bobby Loder recorded at the time, '... the show

could have run for several more nights had time and the energy of the performers permitted.' Moreover, it seems to have run in tandem with a 'fun fair' that included a palmist, conjurer, darts, mock trials and a highly successful race meeting.³¹

By 1943 Eichstätt boasted a fifty-piece orchestra and a theatre that could accommodate 190 patrons with between 30 and 50 seats reserved for other ranks.³² In February 1944, it ran a musical festival that lasted for 33 days and involved 35 performances, (symphonic, light orchestral, choral, orchestral, dance band, chamber music) as well as a show *Round the World with Song and Dance* and a specially commissioned piece by Benjamin Britten, *The Ballad of Little Musgrave and Lady Barnard* that had its première behind barbed wire and was dedicated to 'Richard Wood and the musicians of Oflag VIIB' by the composer.³³ A total of 6,663 seats were sold to a camp population of around 1,800.³⁴ Slightly less high-brow, but no less inventive, were the radio shows 'complete with spoof advertisements' broadcast over the camp PA system at Stalag Luft III.³⁵ Other camps also developed a range of musical groups as well as theatre companies. Marlag (M) had a brass band, a dance band and small string orchestra, Oflag 79 (Braunschweig), five bands and orchestras, and Stalag 383 two dance bands, a pipe band, a Spanish band and a mouth organ band. By 1944, Oflag 79 had two separate stages both with their own entertainment companies involving up to 500 officers and Stalag 383 also had two stages with 'several hundred' seats meaning that each of the 6,000 prisoners could see a show once a fortnight.³⁶

From their inception, the producers of concerts and shows within the Oflags decided to charge admission fees—to regulate demand and to offset the inevitable costs of mounting the productions. Latterly, they used the proceeds to fund future ventures and improve the quantity and quality of their instruments. For example at Laufen, Captains and above were charged 10pfg while those below that rank were charged 5pfg. A number of free seats for each performance were also set aside for the 'other ranks' within the camp. In October 1940, those in charge of entertainments had to borrow Rm.500 from their canteen funds and Rm.250 from the welfare fund to supplement the purchase of orchestral instruments through the Y.M.C.A. totalling Rm.1050. However, a subsequent doubling of admission prices allowed them to repay these loans by the end of the month and achieve a surplus sufficient to afford a piano in early December at a cost of Rm.2064.³⁷

The level of improvisation required to produce shows should not be underestimated. In Stalag Luft III 250 'very comfortable' seats for the theatre were made from Canadian Red Cross boxes and as one inmate later recalled:

... we manufactured tickets, had ushers and offered reserve seats for all regular performances. The stage was elaborate with all kinds of lighting effects including complete fade-outs for the whole auditorium and the stage ... Rheostats (to dim the lights) were improvised, made with buckets of water and bits of cable, metal and wood. [The stage even had disappearing and revolving sections.] Nothing was too difficult or too

trivial in detail to stump a Kreigie who had nothing but time on his hands.³⁸

Michael Goodliffe, who was transferred to Eichstätt in 1942 said of acquiring the necessary resources:

It was a matter of continual nagging, coaxing and organising. Timber, electrical fittings, dress materials, paint and costumes all had to be got into the camp by fair means or foul. [...] Excellent three-ply scenery flats could be constructed from Red Cross parcel crates. Dried milk tins [...] could also be made into reflectors and spotlights.³⁹

The movement of the prisoners from one camp to another by their captors was inevitably disruptive. Productions had to be abandoned and elaborate preparations could be destroyed by arbitrary decisions on allocations of both men and resources, for example when 200 officers were moved from Dössel to Oflag IX-A Spangenburg.⁴⁰ However, the men were sometimes able to bring equipment with them. For example, the officers sent to Dössel in October 1941 were able to utilize the lighting rig brought from Biberach and scenery flats from Laufen.⁴¹ When they were later moved to Eichstätt, the old stage and scenery left by the departing Belgian POWs was deemed 'inadequate' but scenery flats did not arrive from Dössel and were only compensated by the Germans at 'absurdly reduced value.'⁴²

Camp populations had a sprinkling of professional actors and musicians within their ranks who became the mainstays of production companies and orchestras and also guaranteed the quality of many performances. For example, Denholm Elliott appeared in Shakespeare plays during his time at Oflag VIII B (Lamsdorf) and Desmond Llewellyn, Michael Goodliffe and Dan Cunningham could all be found as regular performers at both Eichstätt and Oflag IXA/Z (Rotenburg).⁴³ Captain Alastair Bannerman of the Second Warwickshire Regiment had been a member of John Gielgud's Company since 1937 and was captured soon after D-Day. Arriving at Oflag 79 he noted:

There were 2,000 British officers and everything was going on there. It was a vast, great ex-German Army barracks or something. There were huge buildings and great space and everything was being laid on and they immediately said "you are an actor, what are you going to do?" So having just been in Gielgud's 'School for Scandal' I said, "Alright, I will do 'School for Scandal.'⁴⁴

On the strength of this he was appointed to oversee the entertainments in the camp that included Chekhov's *The Seagull*, Gilbert and Sullivan's *Iolanthe* and poetry readings from the fifteenth century to the present.⁴⁵ Michael Goodliffe, who had been with the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford before the war, quickly became involved in theatrical productions after his capture. Incarcerated at Tittmöning over Christmas of 1940, he wrote to his mother of his involvement in some of the first productions there—pantomimes and sketches—saying, 'I am

in the throes of Christmas entertainments—I work all day without stopping, except for meals.’⁴⁶ His later productions included *Hamlet* in which he played the title role and *Wolfenden: a tale of the frozen North* which he wrote himself. Thus as well as revivals, the camps also witnessed new works being performed for the first time. One of first plays in Eichstätt was Noel Coward’s *Post-Mortem*, a ‘bitter, gloomy anti-war play’ written in 1930 but given its world première in the camp in 1943.⁴⁷

Although the scope of the entertainments in the Oflags was in large part determined by the talents of those incarcerated, there is no doubt that they also allowed others to learn or hone new skills. One soldier, who later played a fairy in *Iolanthe* at Oflag 79 and described it as ‘good fun,’ also recorded his earlier experiences at Oflag VIIA (Moosburg) and Oflag VIIIIF (Märisch-Trübau):

You could imagine that a prison camp containing over a couple of thousand officers there were jack(s) of all trades there. There were people interested in everything, amongst them actors, and so there was a fair amount of theatrical stuff being organised the whole time....⁴⁸

From the available records it is clear that POW productions not only employed and amused a great many inmates, but also garnered substantial sums of money. For example, a nine day run of *Hamlet* at Eichstätt in April 1943 produced box office receipts of Rm.1198.⁴⁹ Even taking into account the costs involved in putting on productions, for example in the hiring or purchase of costumes, wigs and makeup from German suppliers, this did not make many inroads into the surpluses produced and substantial funds were raised from ticket sales and from charitable collections. Thus in December 1941, carol singers at Eichstätt had collected a staggering Rm.10,000 and a fun fair raised even more money for the camp benevolent fund. Money was also sent, via finance officers, to hospitals and camps holding other ranks or civilian internees who had no such access to funds.⁵⁰ For example, at the end of 1942 the men at Eichstätt were able to send Rm.6144 to the Ilag VII (Laufen) and Ilag VII/Z (Tittmöning) for the benefit of the internees held there.⁵¹ Likewise an elaborate cabaret that ran for ten nights at Weinsberg in July 1944 coupled with a race night, auction and raffle raised £3,733 which was then donated to the Y.M.C.A.⁵²

Up to this point, most of the discussion has centred on the role of entertainments in Oflags, where the officers who could not be compelled to work had enormous amounts of time on their hands as well as monetary resources. From the very beginning of their captivity, ordinary servicemen and NCOs in the Stalags were heavily utilised as a labour force by the Germans—often in very inhospitable circumstances. One man who had been a professional musician found himself at Stalag VIII-B Lamsdorf where he was employed on heavy forestry work and where ‘it was hard going working five-and-a-half days a week.’ Nevertheless he and his comrades did suffer from boredom and formed ‘a bit of a band.’⁵³ Likewise in Stalag XX-A (Thorn) many men were employed on digging sand and road building, working full days from 7am to 7pm, ‘but then in the evening [they] would be rehearsing.’⁵⁴ The subdivision of men into smaller

labour detachments and deployment on farms militated against the long-term development of the musical or theatrical companies evident in the Oflags, although a number of larger camps boasted a wide range of productions. For example, David Wild, a chaplain attached to the 4th Battalion Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, who had been captured near Dunkirk, recalled a 'first rate variety show' in November 1942 at Stalag XX-A with 'lovely 'girls,' riotous knockabout, good singing and acting, the whole backed by the best band by far that I have heard here.' By March 1944 he was 'busy plugging away at accompaniments for a riotously funny cowboy show' written in camp about 'a Cockney who won £50,000 on the pools and went out and bought a ranch.'⁵⁵

The comedian and raconteur Sam Kydd was also a prisoner in Stalag XX-A and fortuitously became a member of a concert party of around 20 men who were not sent out on working details but employed locally so that they could rehearse. He was clear about the impact it had on him, and on his audiences.

It was a permanent part of possibly 5,000-6,000 men's lives and as for me, I just revelled in it. I suppose you could call it my first real 'affaire' with the Theatre. I loved the preparation, the rehearsals, the setbacks and the way it kept me occupied. The opening night, if a success, gave pleasure to the audiences and set up a strong feeling of communication. I know they were a "captive" audience, but I would say that among all the POWs who never under any circumstances went to the theatre in civvy street, many developed an appreciation, and in time a super-hypercritical appreciation, formed and initiated only through our prancing and singing on the stage.⁵⁶

Although, as Anna Wickiewicz suggests, it may have been true that British POWs preferred to perform comedies, even where the audience preferences were for farces and musical entertainments groups in these camps did move on to presenting full-length (straight) plays.⁵⁷ With no access to the largesse afforded by officers whose pay and consumption patterns helped to subsidise entertainments in the Oflags, the men in the Stalags were more dependent on outside help. Sapper Arthur Butler, also held at Thorn, recalled that willing artists, set-builders and painters were easy to find among the camp population, but that Red Cross help was needed to acquire play scripts and musical instruments, although, as we have seen, some Oflags also made donations to Stalags in the form of funds or actual materials.⁵⁸ Where outside help was unavailable, other methods had to be adopted. A concert party started in March 1944 by the men of Arbeitskommado E12402 attached to Stalag VIII-A put on shows every other Sunday 'to break the monotony,' in spite of being employed in shift work in the Silesian mines. In order to elicit material for the shows, they organised a competition:

...for the writing of sketches, and one act plays, all very much needed for future shows. We are giving 50 cigarettes as a first prize and a second prize of 30 cigarettes. Ten extra being given for anything produced on our stage.⁵⁹

As the producer noted in his diary, 'if that doesn't bring 'em in—nothing else will!!!'⁶⁰ In spite of the fact that shows were eventually monthly, they were still being produced in February 1945 when the men were evacuated westwards. Other Stalags boasted similar activities. Robert Harding wrote of Stalag IV-B Mühlberg:

One hut was given over to act as a theatre and this became the thriving centre for cultural activities. Among so many, there were writers of ability, and a core of good, professional actors and musicians. So it was that plays were written, produced and performed, while music was composed and played. The audiences were most appreciative and entered into the spirit of the shows. It was so enjoyable to be able to lose oneself in the fantasy of the play being performed.⁶¹

In sum, plays, concerts and other musical entertainments were not restricted to the officer camps and the impetus to organise similar productions—often in the most unpropitious circumstances—could also be found among the other ranks carrying out hard manual labour six days a week.

Judging the reception and impact of all these entertainments on the prisoners is more complex and perforce based on limited sources. The performers did have a 'captive audience' in the sense that there was little else for those in the camps to look forward to and any form of entertainment—either good or bad—was a welcome relief. The men involved in the productions of entertainments, either as performers or backstage have inevitably tended to dwell on the positive notices that their work received. Alastair Bannerman received 'a number of nice letters' including one from his commanding officer:

I have now enjoyed 'kriegie' productions for two years, some of which have been of an exceedingly high standard, but I consider your production of 'School for Scandal' has reached a new all time high.⁶²

The general standard of productions was undoubtedly varied, but audiences were usually very forgiving. Thus, for example, a straight play *The Black Eye* was presented at Dössel in early 1941 and although the production had been a failure on the London stage, 'it was undoubtedly the great success in a prison camp and ran for nine nights to crowded houses.'⁶³ A different view came from the magazine *Touchstone*, in June 1944. An article entitled 'The Lifeboat's Crew' noted that:

Prison camp audiences are difficult to impress. To them the actor is no creator of mystery but the man who sleeps in the bed above you, or the man who attends your Spanish classes. [...]The audience does not change except for occasional additions and therefore it likes to see new faces on the stage and often criticises the old ones unjustly and harshly, praising the newcomer unduly only because he is new.⁶⁴

Likewise prisoners spoke of the ‘uplifting’ effect of performances of classical music and many felt that their time as POWs had expanded their musical knowledge and appreciation.⁶⁵ It was also claimed that those engaged in ‘artistic activity’ had an advantage over fellow POWs in that, not only did the activity alleviate the boredom but also served to ‘transform what might have been wasted years into journeys of self-discovery and artistic enrichment.’⁶⁶ Lieutenant Richard Wood (later to become a director of the Glyndebourne Festival) summed up his experience:

Those of us who were doing music had the very good fortune to have a daily job. For five years I had the great joy of seeing a community thrive on music [...] and I am convinced that, through the music we were able to do, many of us have brought back either a deeper, or a new, permanent happiness in our lives.⁶⁷

Although straight plays were appreciated, it was the musical comedy revues ‘full of low-brow puns and innuendo’⁶⁸ that were undoubtedly the most popular, as is clear from the long runs of some camp pantomimes. Airey Neave reflected on a piece he contributed to a revue called *Ballet Nonsense* at Colditz in late 1941. ‘It is difficult to say whether, in a normal atmosphere, this wretched little piece would be regarded as funny, but it was an uproarious success in the all-male atmosphere of Oflag IV-C.’ In similar vein, Tommy Catlow who was also imprisoned there remembered that ‘the productions were ham but fun [...] and filled a gap in one’s time with make believe.’⁶⁹

However, not everyone approved. Ellison Platt, the Methodist chaplain in Colditz was worried about homosexuality and ‘incipient cases of sexual perversion among British officers’ and felt that ‘jocular references to masturbation’ were much freer than amongst ‘healthy minded adults.’⁷⁰ Similarly, the vexed question of how to present plays and other entertainments with an all-male cast caused some concern. The dilemma was solved in much the same way as it had been in pre-war public schools, by having men play the women’s part and, although initially a cause for a good deal of ‘merriment’ and concern that prisoners who played female roles would become objects of lust, the presentation of female roles had to be addressed carefully and intelligently if productions were to be convincing.⁷¹ A review of a Bill Chambers production at Weinsberg in May 1944 noted that the actor playing the leading female role was lovelier than ever—too lovely to be healthy.⁷² Michael Goodliffe claimed that in his camps ‘two or three clever actors solved the problem, so that our audiences accepted them exactly as the Elizabethans accepted their boy-actors.’⁷³ In similar vein, Bobby Loder sang the praises of one of his actors:

It is quite impossible for anyone who did not witness his performance to appreciate its quality. To say he was ‘as good as a girl’ would be damning with faint praise and it is doubtful if any girl could have acted the part better, if indeed as well.⁷⁴

Some performances also served to inspire and recruit other performers. David Wild records that an impromptu performance by convalescent patients led to musicians on the hospital staff, many of whom were army bandsmen but who had never ‘got together as a band,’ subsequently forming their own band.⁷⁵

While the entertainments created and performed in the camps undoubtedly had a huge value in occupying time, boosting morale and providing a welcome relief from the tedium of everyday life—in both Oflags and Stalags—there were nonetheless links to attempts at escape and this interrelationship manifested itself in a wide variety of forms. Firstly, there can be no doubt that, in some cases, stage productions were used to disguise escape attempts. The sounds of choirs, rehearsals and set-building could be used to mask the sounds of digging and tunnel building and thus confuse both guards and any sound detection systems they were using. For example, Paul Brickhill records in *The Great Escape*, ‘... if you want a really noisy diversion ... we ought to have some music while you work’ resulting in ‘about a hundred prisoners gathered outside the library window raising their voices in community song’ to cover the noise of tunnelling.⁷⁶ Another facet of this was the premises used for the productions which could sometimes be in more advantageous positions for escape attempts; either nearer camp perimeters that shortened the potential length of tunnels or closer to the gates. Such premises were also less likely to be subjected to random searches that might reveal the existence of tunnel entrances, illicit clothing, tools or documentation.

It was also true that materials originally intended for entertainments were harnessed to help escape attempts, but sometimes the links were far more intricate. Perhaps the best and most famous example of this comes from Marlag (O) Westertimke where there was an act based on a show seen in London involving a male dancer with a dummy where the tips of ‘her’ shoes were stitched to the tip of his, so that the couple really seemed as one. This acted as the inspiration for David James, to devise ‘Albert’—a dummy soldier used by escapees from the external bath-house at the camp to mislead the German guards counting heads as the inmates were marched back to the camp.⁷⁷ With the aid of Albert, James was able to make a home run to Sweden. He also acknowledged other forms of help from theatrical sources, speaking of blackening his moustache and darkening his eyes ‘as I had been taught by the theatrical make-up experts.’⁷⁸

As is evident, the value of entertainments to those held captive in prisoner of war camps in Europe during the Second World War went far beyond its widely perceived role as a cloak for escape attempts. Stage performances provided not only a focus for actors, musicians and performers, but also an essential activity for many others in making costumes and scenery, designing sets and lighting. Moreover, ‘hundreds could enjoy themselves immensely for a few hours a week as members of the audience.’⁷⁹ Similarly, as the scale of the entertainments shows, the hundreds soon grew into thousands of officers and men able to escape the harsh reality of their capture on a weekly basis. However, in addition to the boosting of camp morale, other, more individual benefits also accrued. For

some captives the 'requisitioning' of materials and resources for the entertainments allowed them to believe that they were actively weakening the German war effort, albeit only to a limited extent. Similarly, musicians performing the works of Mendelssohn, a banned composer in the Reich because of his Jewish ancestry, took 'quiet satisfaction in knowing they were reintroducing his music to Germany, albeit in a limited way.'⁸⁰ For others, the result of their involvement in camp entertainment carried forward into civilian life after the war. Some prisoners spoke of the benefit they derived from the expansion of their musical knowledge and appreciation and, for Michael Goodliffe in particular, his experience both as a prisoner and in camp entertainment helped frame his subsequent career. In the 20 years following the end of World War 2 he appeared in a number of films and plays dealing with the POW experience including, on stage, *The River Line* with Paul Scofield and Virginia McKenna and, in film, both *The Wooden Horse* and *Von Ryan's Express*.

The sheer scale of what was achieved within the camps was undoubtedly impressive. Prisoners pursued educational and vocational courses initially as intellectual diversions but their numbers increased to the point where Stalag Luft VI (Heydekrug/Śilutė) became known as the barbed wire university with 54 lecturers and over 1,000 students studying a vast range of subjects.⁸¹ POWs also pursued hobbies such as painting and sketching, but these were essentially solitary occupations and "communal activity of one sort or another was needed for the well-being of a camp."⁸² With the exception of sports, this type of occupation was best provided by musical activities or theatre with many prisoners forgetting their circumstances for a short time whilst engaged in their activities – and not just as active participants. As Sam Kydd stated:

Being occupied in entertainment gave me a great kick and fulfilled me a helluva lot. I enjoyed it tremendously. The POWs seemed to like what they saw and in a way I felt that we, the members of the Concert Party, were all contributing to their well-being in this confined and unnatural existence⁸³

¹ David Rolf, *Prisoners of the Reich: Germany's Captives* (London: Leo Cooper, 1988), 93. S. Paul Mackenzie, *The Colditz Myth. The Real Story of POW Life in Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

² Bill Jackson, *The Lone Survivor* (North Battleford: Sask, 1993), 47, cited in Mackenzie, *Colditz Myth*, 210.

³ H. Mytum, 'Deciphering Dynamic Networks from static Images. First World War Photographs at Douglas Camp,' in Gilly Carr and Harold Mytum eds., *Cultural Heritage and Prisoners of War: creativity behind barbed wire* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 148.

⁴ See Neville Wylie, *Barbed Wire Diplomacy: Britain, Germany and the Politics of Prisoners-of-War, 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 2. Sir Herbert Satow and Mrs M. J. Sée, *The Work of the Prisoners of War Department during the Second World War* (London: Foreign Office, 1950), 16, give totals for 30 November 1944 of 180,000 British Imperial servicemen of whom 140,000 were from the United Kingdom. John Nichol and Tony Rennell, *The Last Escape. The untold story of Allied prisoners of war in Germany 1944-1945* (London: Penguin, 2003), 416-420

note that a SHAEF document of March 1945 cites a very precise total of 199,592 but that only 168,746 were recorded as having returned home after the war ended.

⁵ Although the British regarded merchant seamen as civilians, the Germans saw them as military personnel.

⁶ Most Naval personnel and merchant seamen were ultimately housed in a purpose built camp, Marlag-Milag Nord, at Westertimke north-east of Bremen. Ratings were later transferred to Stalag VIII B Lamsdorf in order to be used as labour.

⁷ Satow and Sée, *Prisoners of War Department*, 16.

⁸ Satow and Sée, *Prisoners of War Department*, 24.

⁹ Satow and Sée, *Prisoners of War Department*, 24.

¹⁰ For a detailed account, see Jonathan Vance, 'Men in Manacles: The Shackling of Prisoners of War, 1942-1943,' *Journal of Military History* 59 (1995): 483-504. Paul Mackenzie, 'The Shackling Crisis: A Case Study in the Dynamics of Prisoner-of-War Diplomacy in the Second World War,' *International History Review* 17:1 (1995): 78-98.

¹¹ Sean Longden, *Dunkirk: The Men They Left Behind* (London: Constable, 2007).

¹² Papers of Brigadier R. E. Loder, King's College Cambridge, GBR/0272/PP/REL (Loder Papers KCC), File 12, Entertainments Diary Oflag VIIB Laufen-Dössel-Eichstätt, 1.

¹³ Loder Papers KCC, File 12 Entertainments Diary Oflag VIIB Laufen-Dössel-Eichstätt, 3,10. 'The Lifeboat's Crew,' *Touchstone*, No.8, June 1944: 3.

¹⁴ Loder Papers KCC, File 6 Entertainments Dössel I, 1.

¹⁵ Rolf, *Prisoners of the Reich*, 97-8.

¹⁶ N. M. McKibbin, *Barbed Wire Memories of Stalag 383* (London: Staples, 1947), 84.

¹⁷ Second World War Experience Centre, Wetherby (SWWEC) LEEWW:2001.927 Coles, C.L. RNVR, 'A Wartime Log for British Prisoners,' 10.

¹⁸ <http://www.pegasusarchive.org/pow/frames.htm> Private Les. R. A. Foskett.

¹⁹ A. Gilbert, *POW. Allied Prisoners in Europe 1939-1945* (London: John Murray, 2006), 173. Loder Papers KCC, File 12 Entertainments Diary Oflag VIIB Laufen-Dössel-Eichstätt, 41.

²⁰ Gilbert, *POW*, 174.

²¹ S. Paul MacKenzie, *The Colditz Myth. The Real Story of POW Life in Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 202 cites Sandy Hernu, *Q: The Biography of Desmond Llewellyn* (Seaford: SB Publications, 1999).

²² The RSCDS Perth Branch subsequently printed a description of the dance and sold copies, raising £160 from sales for the benefit of the Red Cross. In 1945, the RSCDS published the dance, having previously refused to publish newly invented dances, following some encouragement from their patron, Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, who had expressed a hope that it would someday be published. The reel, renamed 'The Reel of the 51st Division,' subsequently appeared in Book XIII, the Victory Book (Edinburgh: RSCDS, 1945).

²³ Gilbert, *POW*, 177.

²⁴ Loder Papers KCC, File 12 Entertainments Diary Oflag VIIB Laufen-Dössel-Eichstätt, 5,13,43.

²⁵ Loder Papers KCC, File 6 Dössel Entertainments, 22,31.

²⁶ 'Nights of Gladness'

<http://www.pegasusarchive.org/pow/S383/BarbedWire/BarbedWire43.htm>

²⁷ 'Nights of Gladness'

<http://www.pegasusarchive.org/pow/S383/BarbedWire/BarbedWire43.htm>

²⁸ Loder Papers KCC, File 12 Entertainments Diary Oflag VIIB Laufen-Dössel-Eichstätt, 2. Diary of Flight-Sergeant Henry Jones, <http://www.pegasusarchive.org/pow/frames.htm>.

²⁹ Diary of Gunner Robert McBride, <http://www.pegasusarchive.org/pow/frames.htm>.

³⁰ Loder Papers KCC, File 12 Entertainments Diary Oflag VIIB Laufen-Dössel-Eichstätt, 11. File 6 Dössel Entertainments, 10. Gilbert, *POW*, 179.

³¹ Loder Papers KCC, File 6 Dössel Entertainments, 11,12.

³² MacKenzie, *The Colditz Myth*, 209.

³³ *Evening Standard*, October 10 1991. Helmut Reis, *Chronik der Jägerkaserne Eichstätt, 1933-1952* (Eichstätt: Bereitschaftspolizeiabteilung Eichstätt, 1992), 113-115.

³⁴ Richard Garrett, *P.O.W.*, (Newton Abbot: David and Charles: 1981), 150. Gilbert, *POW*, 180.

³⁵ Gilbert, *POW*, 175.

³⁶ SWWEC: LEEWW: 2001-819 Bannerman. MacKenzie, *The Colditz Myth*, 210.

- ³⁷ Loder Papers KCC, File 12 Entertainments Diary Oflag VIIB Laufen-Dössel-Eichstätt, 6.
- ³⁸ Colonel Delmar T. Spivey in Gilbert, *POW*, 173.
- ³⁹ <http://www.mgoodliffe.co.uk>, accessed May 29 2013.
- ⁴⁰ Loder Papers KCC, File 6 Dössel Entertainments, 14.
- ⁴¹ Loder Papers KCC, File 12 Entertainments Diary Oflag VIIB Laufen-Dössel-Eichstätt, 27.
- ⁴² Loder Papers KCC, File 12 Entertainments Diary Oflag VIIB Laufen-Dössel-Eichstätt, 40.
- ⁴³ Lambirth Papers SWWEC 2001-902, 13. Mackenzie, *Colditz*, 210.
- ⁴⁴ SWWEC: LEEWW: 2001-819 Bannerman.
- ⁴⁵ SWWEC: LEEWW: 2001-819 Bannerman. SWWEC: Tape Recording 2897 Johnson, E.B.W., 13.
- ⁴⁶ <http://www.mgoodliffe.co.uk>, accessed May 29 2013.
- ⁴⁷ <http://www.mgoodliffe.co.uk> accessed May 29 2013.
- ⁴⁸ SWWEC: Tape Recording 2897 Johnson, E.B.W., 7.
- ⁴⁹ Loder Papers KCC, File 20 Miscellaneous, Box Office Returns April 22 1944.
- ⁵⁰ Loder Papers KCC, File 1 Photographs, POWRA Newsletter December 29 1941.
- ⁵¹ Loder Papers KCC, File 12 Entertainments Diary Oflag VIIB Laufen-Dössel-Eichstätt, 43.
- ⁵² SWWEC: LEEWW: 2001-984 Chambers, W.S. 'POW Log,' 67.
- ⁵³ SWWEC: LEEWW: 2002-1461 Appleby.
- ⁵⁴ SWWEC: LEEWW: 2001-847, Butler, A, 22.
- ⁵⁵ David Wild, *Prisoner of Hope* (Lewes, Sussex: The Book Guild, 1992), 71, 187.
- ⁵⁶ Sam Kydd, *For You the War is Over* (London: Bechman and Turner, 1973), 183-4.
- ⁵⁷ A. Wickiewicz, 'In the Distorted Mirror. Cartoons and Captivity of Polish and British POWs in Wehrmacht captivity' in Carr and Mytum *Cultural Heritage and Prisoners of War*, 112.
- ⁵⁸ SWWEC: LEEWW: 2001-847, Butler, A., 22.
- ⁵⁹ SWWEC: LEEWW: 2000-417, Hopper, R.J., Diary, March 31 1944.
- ⁶⁰ SWWEC: LEEWW: 2000-417, Hopper, R.J., Diary, May 9 1944.
- ⁶¹ Robert Harding, *Copper Wire* (Dublin: Chess, 2001), 127.
- ⁶² Letter O/C Oflag 79, 15 November 1944, Bannerman Papers SWWEC 2001-819.
- ⁶³ Loder Papers KCC, File 6 Dössel Entertainments, 14.
- ⁶⁴ Loder Papers KCC, File 17 *Touchstone* No. 8 June 1944: 4.
- ⁶⁵ Gilbert *POW*, 177.
- ⁶⁶ Gilbert *POW*, 180.
- ⁶⁷ Gilbert *POW*, 181. Derek Niemann, *Birds in a Cage* (London: Short, 2013), 125.
- ⁶⁸ Mackenzie *Colditz*, 221.
- ⁶⁹ T. N. Catlow (Liddle Collection, University of Leeds), 76 cited in Mackenzie *Colditz*, 221.
- ⁷⁰ Mackenzie, *Colditz*, 221. See also A. J. Barker, *Behind Barbed Wire* (London: Purnell, 1974), 131-2 who makes direct linkages between theatrical productions involving men performing as women with homosexuality and masturbation.
- ⁷¹ Gilbert, *POW*, 175.
- ⁷² SWWEC: LEEWW: 2001-984 Chambers, W.S. 'POW Log.'
- ⁷³ <http://www.mgoodliffe.co.uk>, accessed May 29 2013. See also the review by 'Greasepaint' in *The Observer Stalag IV-B*, February 15 1944, 3 in Dave Katzeff, ed., *The Observer Stalag IV-B Reproduction of a Hand-printed Prisoner of War Wall Newspaper* (n.d., n.p.)
- ⁷⁴ Loder Papers KCC, File 6 Dössel Entertainments, 8.
- ⁷⁵ Wild, *Prisoner of Hope*, 191.
- ⁷⁶ Paul Brickhill, ed., *The Great Escape* (London: Cassell, 2000), 49. The tools used to dig this particular tunnel had, in fact, been lent by the Germans to enable the building of a camp theatre.
- ⁷⁷ SWWEC: LEEWW: 2001-927 Coles, C.L. RNVR, 'A Wartime Log for British Prisoners,' 11.
- ⁷⁸ David James, *A Prisoner's Progress* (London/Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1947), 79. Eric Williams, *Great Escape Stories* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1958), 71-93.
- ⁷⁹ Mackenzie, *The Colditz Myth*, 210
- ⁸⁰ Gilbert, *POW*, 178.
- ⁸¹ Garrett, *P.O.W.*, 150. Stalag Luft VI was originally Stalag I-C and housed Polish, French, Belgian and Russian prisoners before being used for British and Canadian airmen in 1943. Satow and Séé, *Prisoners of War Department*, 24.
- ⁸² Gilbert, *POW*, 171.
- ⁸³ Kydd, *For You the War is Over*, 148.