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Editorial

This special focus issue was initially suggested by the immanent centenary of the commencement of World War 1 in August 2014. Yet we wanted to do something more and so it has become our small tribute to all the men and women, military combatants or civilians, who provided a psychological lifeline through popular entertainments in times of war. Inevitably the content of the issue has been shaped by the enthusiasms and interests of the contributors. It therefore offers not so much a survey of the topic as a series of vignettes which illuminate the significance of popular entertainments during World Wars 1 and 2 as well as during military actions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Within this context, it is worth noting the remarkable geographical spread covered by the various articles - from the Western Front in France to the Salonika (Thessaloniki) engagement during World War 1; from the Burma-Thai railway to the prisoner-of-war camps in Germany in World War 2; more recently, from Baghdad and Tallil in Iraq to Kabul and the Uruzgan province in Afghanistan. It reinforces the continuities of popular entertainments and certainly their significance and application for military personnel serving in British and Imperial or Commonwealth forces.

The articles are evenly distributed between examinations of civilian contributions and those generated by servicemen whether behind the lines or in prisoner-of-war camps. Civilian and military resources moved very quickly when hostilities began in both World Wars. By December 1914, for example, the highly successful West End actors Ellaline Terriss and Seymour Hicks had contracted a small concert party to visit base camp and hospitals in Boulogne. The same month saw the creation of the first military Divisional concert party in France, *The Follies of the British 4th Division*.¹ While *ad hoc* civilian concert parties would continue to make their appearances at base camps, it needed the administrative skills of committed individuals to insure the provision of concert parties for all the theatres of war. Such individuals included Lena Ashwell and Basil Dean during World War 1 and 2 respectively.

Lena Ashwell came well-connected to the task of organising concert parties (she had married the royal obstetrician Henry Simpson in 1908), and experienced as an actor and theatre manager (she had been the proprietor of London's Kingsway theatre since 1907). Margaret Leask describes the organisation of concert parties Ashwell undertook in the period 1915 to 1919. With the assistance of the Women's Auxiliary Committee of the Y.M.C.A., she was able to send her first concert party to France in February 1915, and over the next few years would be responsible for employing 600 artists to tour the Western Front and as far away as Egypt. Although the principal work of these concert parties was to tour the various base camps and hospitals behind the lines, Leask points out that by late 1918 Ashwell had managed to set up as well 10 permanent concert parties and 7 repertory theatre companies. It was a very considerable achievement and the principles which underpinned the concert party touring - mobility, simple décor and committed, multi-skilled performers - she would attempt to replicate after the war in the work of the Lena Ashwell Players. Ashwell was an evangelist and as such one might be forgiven for regarding her strenuous efforts to improve the cultural tastes of servicemen by providing them with Shakespeare and 'good' music as somewhat elitist. In all fairness, she was herself taken to task at the time for just such tendencies. Yet her own passion and commitment to secure the services of performers who would be prepared to spend up to four weeks behind the lines undertaking two or three concerts a day, were remarkable and were certainly noted by Basil Dean and Leslie Henson. Both of them, experienced directors and actors, had concert party experience, so that their determination to create an organisation that might undertake similar responsibilities during World War 2 to those provided by Ashwell, insured the continuation in this context of the popular entertainment tradition.

The role of the Entertainments National Service Association (E.N.S.A.) has been explored in the accounts of performers who participated in its activities during World War 2 - Jack Hawkins, Vera Lynn, George Formby, Noël Coward, and Ralph Richardson, as examples - as well as in Basil Dean's own *The Theatre at War*.² More recently Andy Merriman has given a fresh evaluation of E.N.S.A.'s achievements.³ In his chapter "Chindit Warriors and Shakespeare Wallahs," Merriman refers to saxophonist Bill Green and the Bengal Services Entertainment Association (B.E.S.A.) which operated as a discrete identity from 1942 to 1944 before being subsumed by E.N.S.A. Anthony Green, Bill Green's son, has therefore a personal investment in the story of this Association, which he takes up in his article.

During World War 1 civilian and military concerts parties formed separate entities although both were supported by the War Office and the various staff officers at Army Headquarters at the front. This distinction was maintained during World War 2 although the lines became blurred when the British Army Welfare created the Central Pool of Artistes, made up of active military personnel who happened to have stage experience.⁴ B. E. S. A. on the other hand seems to have represented a unique collaboration between civilian and military personnel. The organisation was set up in Calcutta, the focus of

military activity in India. From the outset the impetus to provide “entertainment for British and Indian troops in Bengal” came from the wife of the Governor of Bengal together with the wives of expatriate British businessmen who were able to call upon the services of local dramatic societies. The decision, however, to seek the assistance of army and R.A.F. welfare organisations would prove crucial. It led to the creation of a recognised military unit with its headquarters at Calcutta’s Garrison Theatre which became identified as the B.E.S.A. Theatre. Green refers to the fact that over the two years of B.E.S.A.’s existence, the Association attracted the services of 156 civilians and 164 servicemen, of whom his father was one.

As in World War 1 when concert parties were located at base camps and garrison theatres but which also took responsibility for touring often dangerously close to the front lines, so B.E.S.A. took on what it regarded as an essential role to send out touring parties wherever soldiers were quartered. At this point the tyranny of distance became a huge obstacle. Green gives the example of Assam which was 1000 miles from Calcutta, and he shows graphically the difficulties companies faced as they coped with problems of weather, tropical diseases and often sub-standard modes of transportation. While touring plays faced insuperable difficulties, B.E.S.A. created an alternative of small, all-male entertainment units, the *Miniatures*, made up largely of variety artists who indeed made the strenuous journeys to the frontlines. It proved to be a triumph over adversity.

By the end of World War 2, a pattern of civilian and military groups responsible for providing entertainment to servicemen had been established. The need to supply entertainments was now widely recognised as providing an essential strategy that might assist combatants to survive, at least psychologically. That the military now accepted it as an ongoing responsibility can be attested by the formation of, for example, the U.S. United Services Organizations in 1941 and the British Combined Services Entertainment in 1946. This tradition can be further exemplified by the Australian Forces Advisory Committee on Entertainment formed in 1966. After a hiatus between 1985 and 1999, it was re-established and continues to this day to support Australian troops during the engagements in Iraq and latterly, Afghanistan. Like Anthony Green, Richard Gehrman also has a personal investment in his account of the impact of concerts in Iraq and Afghanistan since he has served in both theatres.

Gehrman makes the valuable observations that there existed a high level of domestic support during the two World Wars upon which combatants could rely, while in Australia the support for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan has not been nearly as clear cut. While support for the soldiers involved has been unequivocal, the acceptance of the rationale behind the conflicts has frequently been seen as politically motivated and contingent upon treaty arrangements negotiated between Australia and the United States. Moreover, unlike earlier conflicts, people at home have been largely untouched by the conflicts themselves, notwithstanding the fatalities that have affected soldiers and their families. Gehrman also points to the fact that for the first time female soldiers

have made up a sizable proportion of the Australian contingents involved. Finally, soldiers have had access to electronic entertainments: DVDs, streamed music and movies as cases in point. How have all these factors impinged upon the role and function of live entertainments?

During World War 2 E.N.S.A. was frequently disparaged for the quality of the performers it exported across the world (the label “Every Night Something Awful” enshrines this judgement). Part of the problem lay in the sheer magnitude of E.N.S.A.’s operation: by July 1940 there were 2,000,000 British and Commonwealth soldiers under arms and in the same year 31 touring companies had been sent out while 30 concert parties had toured camps, hospitals presenting 300 plays and 700 variety shows. This number would increase exponentially.⁵ Gehrmann notes that while the scale may be reduced, the politically complex and morally ambiguous nature of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts did have an impact upon the entertainers. A number of them were ideologically opposed particularly to the Iraq War, so that recruiting top grade performers was often difficult particularly when those performers were concerned about the impact their presence might have upon their professional reputations at home. Those who did go found themselves within military environments and constrained by military imperatives such as the wearing of body armour during transport to the venues. Undoubtedly there were risks and dangers from IED’s and rocket fire so that the experience for many was an eye opener. Yet in common with their predecessors during the two World Wars, they found that their concerts formed a welcome antidote to the troop routines of 6-8 month deployments. More importantly, their presence contributed to a re-affirmation that people at home cared. The virtual realities of DVDs and Facebook conversations paled into insignificance when compared to the palpable physical presence of performers who affirmed the links with home and families. In this respect they continued to participate in the traditions established during the World Wars.

The three other articles in this issue all consider the role of popular entertainments from the perspective of actual combatants including those who found themselves incarcerated in Germany and in camps in Singapore and along the Burma-Thai railway. We have seen that the presence of concert parties was felt at the beginning of both World Wars. While civilian parties offered support and psychological reinforcement, the military units reflected directly the concerns the priorities of their colleagues, which contributed to their urgency and immediate relevance. In the prisoner-of-war camps during both wars the entertainment units established there provided a survival mechanism which kept memory alive and gave a sense of meaning in an often meaningless environment where time had apparently stood remorselessly still.

Martina Lipton discusses the performances of the 85th Field Ambulance (28th Division) during the years 1915-1918. Deployed in and around Salonika, the Division found itself isolated and largely ignored by the military authorities whose focus of attention was the Western front. Moreover, the public perception tended to regard the Salonika engagement as an indulgent side-show far

removed from the realities in France. The reality, however, was very different. Malaria was a constant presence; U-boats were preventing supplies from reaching the Aegean, and the Macedonian terrain was extremely rugged and inhospitable. No civilian concert parties visited Salonika, so the Field Ambulance took it upon itself to provide the entertainment needed to alleviate the effects of isolation and distance. Lipton focusses on three very particular manifestations, the production of three pantomimes: *Dick Whittington* (1915), *Aladdin in Macedonia* (1916) and *Bluebeard* (1917) which toured extensively. *Dick Whittington* toured for five weeks spending ten days at each of the Divisional Brigades while *Bluebeard* was performed for a five month season. The point about this is to emphasise their enormous popularity among men in some of the more remote regions of Macedonia and as well on board the battleships stationed in Salonika harbour. It also raises the whole issue of the significance of the pantomime form itself and its enduring presence during both World Wars. Pantomime has usually been regarded as a particularly English phenomenon, and indeed the tradition of its performance accompanied English immigrants throughout the world, from Australasia, Canada and South Africa to India and Hong Kong. By the beginning of World War 1, the form of pantomime, a story based on fairy tales or popular legends fleshed out with variety acts and relevant contemporary and often local references had been well established. Above all, going to the pantomime at Christmas formed an annual family event. It is this aspect in particular that would resonate among troops especially those isolated in geographically distant theatres or incarcerated in prisoner-of-war camps. It brought out vividly the memories of home and family and offered a temporary reassurance of an apparently seamless trajectory of stability. It is little wonder that the Salonika pantomimes should refer insistently to idealised English pastoral villages in their settings. At the same time, the framing of the storylines in worlds of make believe allowed the performers and their audiences to indulge themselves in good-humoured satire of their officers and to ventilate their grievances especially about food and rationing.

Unlike their civilian counterparts, military concert parties were entirely male, which led to the extraordinary flowering of numbers of female impersonators, most of whom had no previous experience of drag performance before joining their concert parties. There had always existed a tradition of the performance of grotesque female roles in pantomime generally and among the British army variety concert troupes. These impersonators, however, performed a rather different function. Lipton quotes the review of a Corporal Edward J. Dillon who played the female lead in the 1917 Salonika pantomime: "too splendid for words - acting and looking a girl's part to perfection. And not an ordinary girl, mind you, but a damned beautiful girl." In other words, the performance was experienced as though Dillon was a woman and not merely a man in drag. This is an important distinction which is further developed by Sears Eldredge in his discussion of female impersonators in camps on the Burma-Thai railway in World War 2.

Convincing female impersonators had been much sought after even during World War 1. It became simply insufficient to demonstrate a facility for

comic drag acts: male audiences demanded convincing female impersonation, nowhere more insistently than in the prisoner-of-war camps in Changi or in Chungkai. Inevitably the question arises about the incidence of homosexuality in such camps. As Eldredge suggests, the boundaries of the heterosexual norm became permeable although the witnessing of homosexual acts was extremely rare. Congestion and malnutrition would have contributed to this regardless of the audiences' intensity of desire to believe (to paraphrase J. G. Fuller's comments about female impersonators in World War 1). The example of British performer Bobby Spong demonstrates the idolisation of convincing female impersonators and the lengths to which the performers themselves went to create their personas.

Female impersonation remained a feature in all prisoner-of-war camps. Bon Moore and Barbara Hately refer to this in passing as they return to the European conflict and those prisoners who were interned in German camps during World War 2. Although the literature about prisoners-of-war has progressively since the end of World War 2 revealed the appalling conditions of incarceration and iterated in accounts of the Korean and Vietnam wars, the popular imagination has tended to be shaped by escape stories on film or by stories of imperturbability in the face of German incompetence as in television's *Hogan's Heroes*. One might be forgiven for believing that prisoners were animated by a tradition of adventure stories that harked back to *Boys' Own Paper* paradigms.⁶ The reality was rather different. Very few escaped and the penalties on recapture were harsh. The real issues that faced prisoners-of-war were those related to morale: how to endure the day-to-day monotony in overcrowded camps, the diseases brought about by malnutrition, the gruelling rigours of the work details sent to salt and coal mines or road building, and how to cope with the loss of memory brought about by isolation from the emotional verities that had been stripped from them along with their identities. Moore and Hately reinforce the significance of popular entertainments as coping mechanisms, showing how entertainment organisations within the camps sprang up almost immediately after soldiers were captured. Both officers and 'other ranks' worked to establish venues where plays, music and variety shows as well as pantomimes could be performed. In some officers' camps hugely elaborate stagings could be set up, sometimes with the connivance of German theatrical suppliers. But regardless of the scale of their endeavours all prisoners realised that exposure to or involvement in popular entertainments could lead them on journeys of renewed self-discovery at best or on a path towards psychological rehabilitation at the very least.

¹ J. G. Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion armies 1914-1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 95.

² Basil Dean, *The Theatre at War* (London, Harrap, 1956).

³ Andy Merriman, *Greasepaint and Cordite: the story of ENSA and concert party entertainment during the Second World War* (London: Aurum Press, 2013).

⁴ Known colloquially as *Stars in Battledress*, the organisation would become the Combined Services Entertainment in 1946 after the demise of E.N.S.A. See Bill Pertwee, *Stars in Battledress: a light-hearted look at service entertainment in the Second World War* (Rickmansworth, Herts: Atlantic Publishing, 2006).

⁵ John Graven Hughes, *The Greasepaint War: show business 1939-45* (London: New English Library 1976), 58.

⁶ Even the latest book on World War 1 prisoners attempt to 'rehabilitate' them as indefatigable resisters carrying on a fight behind the wire. John Lewis-Stempel, *The War behind the Wire: the life, death and glory of British prisoners of war 1914-18* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2014).