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Captive Audiences / Captive Performers - Complete Text

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Captive Audiences / Captive Performers

Music and Theatre as Strategies for Survival
on the Thailand-Burma Railway 1942-1945

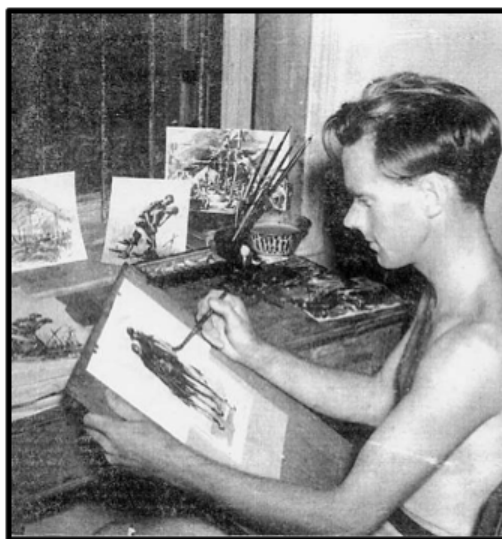


By Sears A. Eldredge

DEDICATION



Laurie Allison



Jack Chalker

All art is a challenge to despair.

—Eric Bentley
The Life of the Drama

In the performance they affirmed the drama as freedom. They asserted the superior life of the imagination. In the moment of performance they were not in custody. They created character from a longing for other life. They demonstrated by their conviction that drama was a necessity and not a pleasure or a diversion.

—Howard Barker
“On watching a performance by life prisoners”

One has to wonder whether the act of performing art—whether theatre or music—may be accompanied by a wholeness of self that transcends time and place and creates a buoyancy of mood and spirit. By engaging an audience who needed something emotionally meaningful to hold on to, perhaps they temporarily sustained the will to live.

—Rebecca Rovit
Theatrical Performance during the Holocaust

Introduction

Wonder Bar

On the evening of 19 May 1944, a remarkable theatrical event was about to take place. Intensive musical and staging rehearsals had gone on for weeks under the leadership of a dictatorial British director. The sets, including a splendid backdrop of snow-capped Alpine mountains, were ready on the wide proscenium stage. An extensive array of costumes had been designed and constructed with expert care. The orchestra was tuned up and waiting in the pit to take its cue for the overture. Footlights were lit, and the curtain was about to rise on a revival of the 1929 musical comedy *Wonder Bar*.

But this wasn't London's West End. This theatre was located on the edge of the jungle in Thailand. The sets had been constructed from bamboo and *atap* (palm fronds). Ladies' dresses were made from mosquito netting; high-heeled shoes were carved from wood. The lighting was a combination of borrowed pressure lanterns and homemade slush lamps. And the performers were all men: Allied prisoners of the Japanese during the Second World War.



FIGURE O.1. PUBLICITY POSTER FOR *Wonder Bar*.
CHUNGKAI. COURTESY OF JOHN SHARP.

This extraordinary theatre production took place at Chungkai hospital camp, where a proscenium stage, also made out of bamboo and *atap*, had been constructed with auditorium seating carved out of a sloping bank for 2,000 sick and recovering POWs. The authoritarian British director was actually a corporal who had been in the cast of the original West End production; the orchestra and cast were a mixture of officers and men from the British and Netherlands East Indies armed forces. On opening night the Japanese camp commandant and his staff sat in the front row.

The POW performers and audience members were at Chungkai recovering from the physical and

psychological damage incurred while building the infamous Thailand-Burma “death” railway.ⁱ For an hour and a half the show allowed them to escape the rotten smell of gangrenous leg ulcers, the debilitating bouts of malaria and dysentery, and the growing mountain of crosses in a plot behind the hospital marking the graves of hundreds who had not survived. *Wonder Bar* not only allowed the POWs to forget their past and present horrors, but with its music, laughter, and “beautiful girls,” it reawakened and sustained their memories of the home that was waiting for their return.

In their secret diaries and in later memoirs, many Far Eastern POWs (FEPOWs) noted this production of *Wonder Bar* as one of the most memorable events in their long years as prisoners of the Japanese. But it was only one in an astonishing series of musical and theatrical entertainments performed by British, Australian, Dutch/Indonesian, and American entertainers in this and other camps that had kept the POWs’ spirits going since their capture in 1942 and would continue to do so until their liberation in 1945. The FEPOWs readily admitted that this show, and others like it, gave them the courage and hope to carry on.

Captive Audiences / Captive Performers

Stories of the POWs on the Thailand-Burma railway have been told many times, but here for the first time the focus is on a group of men who continued as combatants in another war—not with the enemy without, against which they could do little, but with the deadly enemy within, who employed the powerful weapons of uncertainty, boredom, and despair to try and defeat them.

Captive Audiences / Captive Performers: Music and Theatre as Strategies for Survival on the Thailand-Burma Railway, 1942–1945 is about these combatants—the musicians and theatrical entertainers—and the performances they devised to keep morale up and hope alive. It is also about the creative imagination and ingenuity exhibited by POW designers and technicians in constructing theatres, scenery, lighting, costumes, and makeup out of scrounged or stolen materials. And it is about the value of the performing arts to prevent minds and emotions from atrophying while fostering a collective identity in the midst of a world where solitary withdrawal was a death sentence.

Contents

The hitherto untold story of these POW entertainers begins with the surrender of Allied Forces in Southeast Asia in early 1942 (Chapter 1). During the first months in captivity, their ability to restore morale among defeated troops was rediscovered and embraced. The narrative then follows the POWs sent to Thailand and Burma in late 1942 and 1943 to build the Thailand-Burma railway (Chapters 2–4). Here amid the disease and squalor of the construction camps, individuals and small groups of entertainers fought their toughest battles to keep themselves and their fellow prisoners from losing the will to live.

ⁱ This railway was made famous by David Lean’s Academy Award–winning film, *The Bridge on the River Kwai*.



FIGURE 0.2. "WORKING MEN, KANYU CAMP" PEN AND WASH DRAWING. JACK CHALKER. COURTESY OF JACK CHALKER.

With the railway's completion, the POWs were removed to hospital and relocation camps in Thailand for rehabilitation. So many musicians and theatrical performers now congregated in these camps that entertainment committees had to be set up to manage their activities (Chapters 5–8). The entertainers faced two major challenges: how to restore the men to the fullness of their humanity after months of degradation and brutality, and how to sustain their morale during the long wait until liberation. The extraordinary shows produced during 1944 to meet these challenges became the high point of POW musical and theatrical production on the Thailand-Burma railway. Where sources permit, these are examined in some detail.

During 1945 and the waning days of the war in the Pacific, the Japanese, recognizing the importance of entertainment in keeping the POWs' morale high, intensified their efforts to severely restrict or eliminate it altogether. Unless performances were specifically banned, the entertainers continued to refuse silence (Chapters 9–10). A montage of victory shows created by the entertainers in celebration of their liberation and brief accounts of their repatriation ends the historical narrative (Chapter 11).

In a change of focus, the latter chapters of the book become more analytical, looking back thematically at the entertainers and the entertainment they produced. Here are found details on how various aspects of the productions (sets, lights, costumes, etc.) were created (Chapter 12); how musical and theatrical producers trained and rehearsed their ensembles (Chapter 13); and how female impersonators were chosen and treated by their fellow prisoners (Chapter 14). The final chapter considers the ways in which music and theatre functioned as strategies for survival.

The book also includes "The FEPOW Songbook"—a collection of lyrics to original songs and song-parodies written and performed by the POWs in their camps.

“For the Troops, By the Troops”

There is a long tradition of musical and theatrical entertainment associated with the military. Regimental bands and marching songs are used not only as a means to keep soldiers in step but as ways to inspire martial fervor and foster unit cohesion. They also lighten the drudgery of a long, hard trek. Spontaneous sing-alongs around bivouac campfires or on the deck of a troop ship during the long voyage out to overseas postings dispel the tedium of military life. One eighteenth-century account relates how British Admiral Lord Nelson “encouraged his men in dancing, music, theatricals and cudgeling.”ⁱ Other historical records tell of garrison theatricals in remote postings.ⁱⁱ

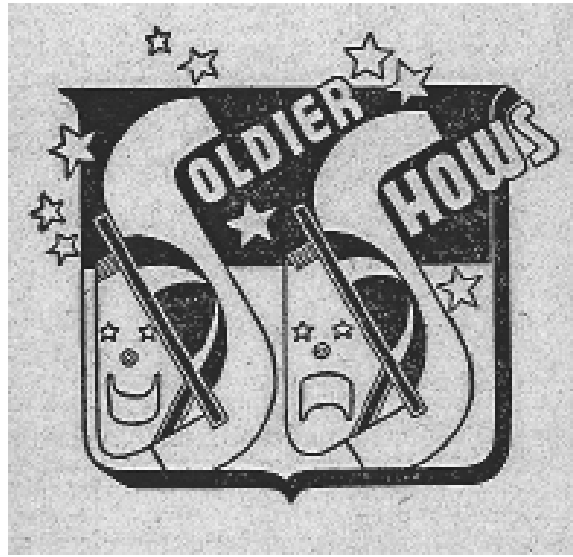


FIGURE 0.3. MASKS OF COMEDY AND TRAGEDY. SOLDIER SHOWS LOGO, 1943.
COPYRIGHT THE INFANTRY JOURNAL, INC., 1943.

More pertinent to this investigation are the unit “concert parties” [*American Soldier Shows*] that took place behind front lines during the First World War, encouraged by the military hierarchy as good for morale boosting and for socialization purposes.² A concert party was supposedly a more polite middle-class version of the boisterous and often bawdy working-class Victorian music halls. But one would have a hard time calling the unit concert parties frequented by the troops “polite.” Better suited to this definition were the concert parties produced by the YMCA or other civilian organizations and performed further back.³ Some of the older officers and other ranks involved in entertainment on the Thailand-Burma railway remembered these World War I shows—and, in a time-honored theatrical tradition, “stole” some of the material for their own productions.

Following the evacuation of their defeated Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk, France, in June 1940, the British Army encouraged the formation of unit concert parties to entertain infantry troops undergoing extensive training in remote areas of Great Britain.⁴ To underscore their importance, the War Office prepared a pamphlet, “The Soldier’s Welfare,” that stated categorically, “Boredom is the worst enemy of an Army’s morale.”⁵ Besides “practical help” on how to ameliorate boredom through recreation, such

ⁱⁱ See Sylvia R. Frey, *The British Soldier in America: A Social History of Military Life in the Revolutionary Period* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), and Leslie O’Dell, “Amateurs of the Regiment, 1815–1870,” in *Early Stages: Theatre in Ontario 1800–1914*, ed. Ann Saddlemyer (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 52–89.

as sports and games, welfare officers were instructed to ensure their troops had access to entertainment.⁶ When such diversion wasn't available through outside sources, such as local cinemas or E.N.S.A.,ⁱⁱⁱ then it had to be provided through their own efforts:

It is good that men should have to make their own amusements as it develops their initiative and keeps them occupied. It is an officer's duty to see that his men get sufficient entertainment to keep them happy, to help and organize it in the unit and to give every encouragement to their efforts to entertain themselves.⁷

Typical of the newly formed concert parties was the 18th Infantry Division's "The Optimists," charged with touring the Territorial Army's installations where troops were preparing for desert warfare in the Middle East.

Concert Party Organization

Other than an officer in charge for administrative purposes, leadership and participation in military concert parties were determined by talent and experience, not rank. While most concert parties were led by an officer with some background in amateur or professional theatre (who then functioned as both producer and director), this wasn't always the case. In situations where the designated officer in charge had no theatrical experience, a qualified producer was sought among the officers and other ranks. When first formed, the Optimists were led by a civilian with professional experience from E.N.S.A. who not only produced but also staged the show.

Producer/Director

Until fairly recently in the British theatre, *producer* was used to denote the person who developed the production, choosing the designers and director as well as the cast; whereas in the American theatre, the term is used to refer to the person who provides funding for the production, and the term *director* is used for the person who functions in all the other capacities. One of a director's most important functions is to determine the flow and pattern of movement (*blocking*) of the characters on stage. In the British theatre, that person was credited with having *staged* the show. Then there is the *stage manager*, who is responsible for running the show during performances once it has been "set" onstage. In the diaries and memoirs of POWs outside the theatrical profession, these terms become muddled yet again, with *producer* and *stage manager* sometimes used for the director's role.

The Company

The Optimists consisted of ten performers seconded to the concert party from various units within the 18th Division. Besides magician Fergus Anckorn (an important contributor to this study), there was a soldier who did impersonations, a professional violinist, an accordionist, two classically trained pianists/

ⁱⁱⁱ Established in 1939, the Entertainments National Service Association "had been given the task of supplying the Forces with music and other forms of entertainment" [Colonel A. C. T. White, V.C., *The Story of ARMY EDUCATION 1643–1963* (London: George G. Harrap & Co., Ltd., 1963), 110]. Because it badly misjudged what kind of entertainment the troops really needed, its acronym came to signify "Every Night Something Awful."

accompanists, a professional vocalist, an actor, a comedian, and a stage manager.^{iv} Larry Croisette, a cowboy singer who had been a carpenter in civilian life, doubled as the technical director.^{v8} Versatility was an important factor in being chosen for the concert party. All members of the company were expected to participate in sketches as needed and to function as part of the technical crew.⁹ “Scenery, props and equipment had to be loaded on to a lorry, off-loaded at the venue and put up before a performance could take place,” explained Richard Fawkes. “When the curtain fell on a show everything had to go back on the lorry before the company could return to barracks and bed.”¹⁰

Like the soldiers “down under,” training for the First Australian Army Entertainment Unit, all concert party performers were told, “You are primarily soldiers. You will fight when called upon, learn to live off the land; but your most important role will be to entertain, to boost morale of our boys at the front.”¹¹

After nine months of touring, Lieutenant John J. Mackwood, “a sort of actor, very show-bizzy sort of little man,”¹² took over the Optimists as officer in charge and producer-director. Mackwood had been granted special permission to bring his wife, Marianne, and another actress (“some sort of soubrette”^{vi}) into the concert party, giving it just the fillip it needed (and what had always been an essential component of military concert parties): the presence of female figures and “glamour.”¹³ In most military concert parties the “glamour” had to be provided by female impersonators.

Concert Party Formats

Since variety shows and revues were the easiest to mount, these theatrical forms were favored by military concert parties. In a “Soldier Shows Guide” prepared for American “Military and Naval Establishments,” Edwin Duerr enumerated their advantages:

This type of show will be most frequently produced because in addition to its entertainment values, it utilizes the services of a crowd of performers, because the various specialities of each individual can be advantageously displayed, because the rehearsal time for the separate acts will be relatively short, and because the actors will never have to sustain their parts for any great length of time.¹⁴

Variety. A variety show [American *vaudeville*] consisted of a series of musical, specialty, and comedy acts (*turns*) introduced by a master of ceremonies (*compère*) who kept the audience entertained in between the acts with jokes and clever repartee. The traditional format of a concert party differed in that opening and closing choruses were performed by the full company, and these required additional rehearsal time.

Revue. “Revues . . . differ from vaudeville [variety],” continued Duerr, “only in that they are usually better organized and more integrated as a whole—often employ[ing] some sort of vague continuity or framework which holds the many parts together. The revue director, then, will customarily design or

^{iv} The other company members were imitator Oliver Thomas; violinist Denis East; accordionist Fred Coles; pianists Jack Appleton and Cyril Wycherley; vocalist John Downey, actor Richard Goodman, comedian Reginald Tonsley; and stage manager Chris Buckingham [Anckorn, Interview, 3–4].

^v Croisette will become an important figure in the concert parties in Thailand.

^{vi} A soubrette is an actress who plays young, pretty, flirtatious character types, also known as soubrettes. Unfortunately, at the time of this interview, Anckorn could not remember the soubrette’s name.

collect his acts with a general subject in mind, or, as is more likely to be the case, he will gather together his material and then hope he can manufacture a theme from it.”¹⁵

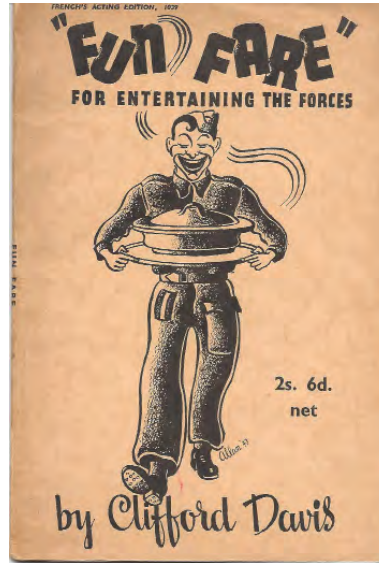


FIGURE 0.4. “*Fun Fare*” FOR ENTERTAINING THE FORCES. SAMUEL FRENCH, LTD., 1943.

Kinds of Acts

According to Duerr, playbills for variety shows and revues should consist of songs, dances, skits, monologues and impersonations, mimes, and a few specialty acts (i.e., jugglers, acrobats, whistlers, etc.), although, in his opinion, the latter should only appear “in small doses.”¹⁶

Content

“It isn’t easy, or wise to generalize about Army shows,” wrote Dick Richards of “The Wightwick Rags”^{vii} in his introduction to a collection of comic sketches for the British military. “But I find the audiences prefer the accent on laughter.” He went on to caution about acceptable and unacceptable types of humor:

They don’t care for over-sophisticated stuff, but on the other hand don’t pin your faith exclusively to slapstick. For a man doesn’t leave his brain behind him with his civilian clothes. They will not stomach “blue” or unpleasantly suggestive material, but they do like their fun garnished with a little sauce.

They are very fond of material which pulls the Army’s leg hard. Particularly do they enjoy gags at the expense of local camp conditions and local camp personalities.¹⁷

^{vii} *A concert party in the European theatre.*

Censorship. The hardships of life in the military and the foibles of its leadership had traditionally been fair game for concert party send-ups, tolerated in the spirit of camaraderie and as a safety valve giving voice to the grumbling always prevalent among the ranks. This relative permissiveness doesn't mean censorship wasn't an issue, however.

There had always been an understanding that military concert party shows should be "clean and free from smut."¹⁸ Plenty of foul language may have been spoken around the men daily, but it was not to be countenanced publically on stage. "There is no need for it," wrote Major Leofric Thorpe. "Shows resort to dirt when they have run out of talent and ideas."¹⁹ "Nevertheless," as Jack Boardman and Geoffrey Monument noted, "there were plenty of double entendre and risqué remarks."²⁰ For example, John Wood,^{viii} dressed as a very attractive woman, sang a song that always got a rise out of his audience: it contained the line, "I've got the deepest shelter in town."²¹ Or there was the sketch in which a young officer calling home tries to explain to his mother the use of Indian troops: "You see, mother, they are white officers with black privates."²²

There were times, though, on the Thailand-Burma railway when the "rough stuff" got presented as well. "Some of the jokes and songs were very low but that is quite excusable with all male audience," wrote medical officer Ian Mackintosh following their Boxing Day pantomime *So Tite and the Seven Twirps* [sic] at Chungkai in 1943. "Someone even produced tha[t] limerick abo[u]t Mary keeping her lamb in a bucket!! I must say I never expected to hear that on the stage."²³

"Light Duty"

The idea that entertainers should be released from all but nominal camp duties so they had time to plan and rehearse the shows was a tradition that began with the First World War concert parties. This provision frequently caused complaints from other troops, who thought the entertainers were having it easy. But Corporal Leonard Stewart of the Australian 8th Division's concert party vigorously defended the practice:

Many people do not appreciate the preparation that has to be gone through to stage even the smallest of entertainment, the time, worry and anxiety shown by all that administer and participate. The scenes, setting, suitable music and the general atmosphere, all these things have to be studied with the greatest of accuracy. Most would think that a concert of entertainment just happens, giving little thought to what goes before the staging. Obstacles such as these do not enter the head of many people, [who believe] the artist or artists step onto the stage and begin their parts parrot fashion, but this is not so. Much time and hard practice must be indulged in to ensure the success of the scene or item. Hence the arduous task in preparing for and setting out a programme that will appeal to all.^{ix24}

^{viii} *Of the A.I.F. Malayan Concert Party.*

^{ix} Though Corporal Stewart wrote this statement in 1944 as part of an official report on the Australian Imperial Forces [A.I.F.] Concert Party, the arguments he presents were always valid. Stewart was an assistant to Captain Val Mack, the concert party's officer in charge, and you can hear Mack's voice dictating the justification. When the POWs were removed from Changi POW camp to the Changi Gaol in the spring of 1944, the A.I.F. concert party was combined with other companies and a British officer placed in charge. The report must have been Mack's attempt not to have the unique story of the A.I.F. Concert Party lost to history.

The entertainers understood that their release time was conditional, “with the proviso that if need be they would revert to fighting soldiers.”²⁵

Diversion

Once the 18th Infantry Division received orders for overseas deployment, the Optimists disbanded and the performers returned to their original units. They embarked for the Middle East from Liverpool in November 1941. It was after the division sailed around the Cape of Good Hope headed to Bombay, India, where they would be fitted out for their new posting, that the Japanese launched their attacks in the Far East. In an attempt to bolster the Dominion forces defending Malaya and “the impregnable fortress” at Singapore, the 18th Division was diverted to Southeast Asia. The convoy arrived in Singapore on 29 January 1942, and the troops were immediately put into battle. Fergus Anckorn wasn’t the only soldier who thought they had been sent on a fool’s errand: “Three and a half months without setting foot on land. Talk about being ready for action. Our knees were jelly. And, you know, we had to go off that ship under fire, under bombing.”²⁶ Seventeen days later, they were prisoners of war.

Notes to the Reader

Unit and Rank Designations. Rank and unit designations, while terribly important to a military person’s identity, have been given little acknowledgment here. This decision was made not to disparage their significance but so the reader, already burdened with a multitude of details in this text, would not suffer further.

Racism. The reader will encounter many instances of racism in the sources for what follows. The war in the Pacific was not just a power struggle over geographic possessions and material resources but a clash of beliefs and cultures. In the years leading up to the war, both sides fueled their public’s prejudices with racist propaganda of “the other” in posters, newspaper articles, and films.

To embolden their fighting spirit, Japanese troops were indoctrinated with the belief that they were freeing the nations of East and Southeast Asia from colonial rule so that a “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere” could be established. The Japanese were helped in this regard by the colonists’ tendency to treat their Asian subjects as inferior and to resist any attempts at self-determination. But the Imperial Japanese Army’s horrific treatment of defeated Chinese soldiers and civilians in Nanking and other places belied their stated goal.

On the other hand, the Allied Forces, which also included colonial volunteer forces, believed they were defending the peoples within their colonial empires and spheres of influence from “the yellow peril.” Those servicemen who became prisoners of war had to contend with the Japanese warrior code of *bushido*: its proscription against surrender on the battlefield—a dishonorable act—would determine their treatment. Nor did they understand that corporal punishment for the slightest infraction of the rules was part of the Japanese soldier’s life.

During construction of the Thailand-Burma railway, POWs from various units and nationalities were forced to live and work side by side in cramped and squalid camps sharing scarce medical supplies and food. The stress of harsh conditions and prolonged association exacerbated national, ethnic, and racial tensions normally kept in check. In the more stable environment of hospital and relocation camps, “turf wars” occurred between ranks and nationalities regarding rights to produce entertainment, some of which,

in the treatment of Dutch/Indonesian performers, had distinct ethnic and racial overtones. Petty artistic jealousies also surfaced among entertainers as they vied for recognition and status.

And now, “Beginners, please!”^x

Endnotes

- 1 Turner, 98.
- 2 See Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture*, and <http://www.reocities.com/CollegePark/4825/concertparties.html>.
- 3 <http://www.reocities.com/CollegePark/4825/concertparties.html>.
- 4 Fuller, 179.
- 5 War Office, 4.
- 6 War Office, 1.
- 7 War Office, 15.
- 8 Anckorn, Interview, 6.
- 9 Anckorn, Interview, 3–4, 18.
- 10 Fawkes, 37.
- 11 Dawson, 97.
- 12 Anckorn, Interview, 4.
- 13 Anckorn, Interview, 4; E-mail, 8 August 2006.
- 14 Duerr, 121.
- 15 Duerr, 122.
- 16 Duerr, 127.
- 17 Richards, 4.
- 18 Jack Boardman, “The Changi Concert Party,” 2–3.
- 19 Thorpe, Letter to Allison, 21 February 1988.
- 20 Jack Boardman, “The Changi Concert Party,” 2–3.
- 21 Jack Boardman, Letter, 5 January 2004.
- 22 Monument, E-mail, 6 December 2008.
- 23 Mackintosh, Diary, 26 December 1943.
- 24 Stewart, “AIF Concert Party Report,” 1.
- 25 Fawkes, 36.
- 26 Anckorn, Interview, 22.

^x A British theatre expression instructing actors for the opening act of a show to take their places on stage.

Chapter 1: “In the Bag”

Changi POW Camp, Singapore

The musical and theatrical entertainment that took place along the Thailand-Burma railway was performed by British, Australian, Dutch/Indonesian, and American POWs who had been captured in early 1942 when Imperial Japanese Forces conquered most of Southeast Asia. This chapter focuses on the performers sent to Burma or Thailand from Singapore between late spring and fall of that year. It acts, therefore, as a “curtain-raiser” to all that follows. The story of entertainment created by POWs sent directly to Burma from the Netherlands East Indies is told in Chapter 3: “Jungle Shows”: Burma.

Prisoners of War

On 15 February 1942, Lieutenant-General Arthur Percival of Malaya Command surrendered the British Commonwealth forces defending Singapore to Lieutenant-General Tomoyuki Yamashita of the Imperial Japanese Army. Two days later, all the “fit” Commonwealth troops were imprisoned in what had supposedly been the “impregnable fortress” at Changi on the eastern end of Singapore Island. They were now “in the bag”—prisoners of war.

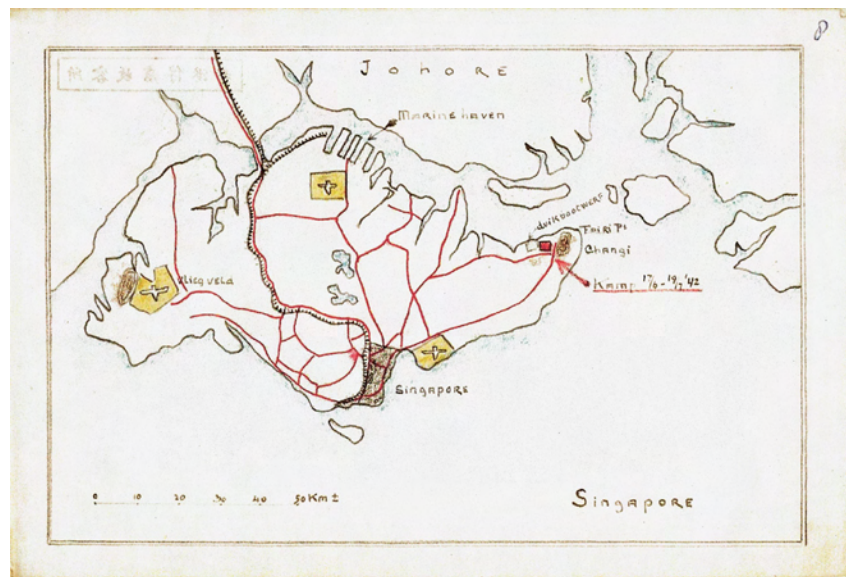


FIGURE 1.1. MAP OF SINGAPORE SHOWING CHANGI POW CAMP. H. J. D. DE FREMERY. IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

Priorities

Once in Changi, first priority was given to bringing order out of chaos. This meant tackling several issues simultaneously, such as finding accommodation, food, water, and fuel for the more than 52,000 demoralized troops herded together within the confines of the former garrison. Concurrent with those priorities was the need to reestablish military discipline.

Military discipline. The POWs' disgust at the incompetence of those who had been in command in the battles for Malaya and Singapore created potential for chaos of another kind: anarchy—a situation that had to be resolved as quickly as possible. Whatever the POWs' thoughts and feelings about their situation and who was responsible for it, their only hope for survival lay in maintaining their military structure and discipline. Therefore, discipline was re-imposed—in some cases brutally.¹

Accommodation. By the end of the first week, the sprawling POW camp at Changi had been subdivided into separate areas corresponding to the five divisions that had formed Malaya Command's battle order.¹ Sitting approximately midway on the peninsula, and adjacent to each area, were the Roberts Barracks, now designated as the general hospital for the entire POW camp.² Once the fit soldiers were in Changi, the sick and wounded troops were evacuated there from hospitals in Singapore.³

Food. For the first two weeks the POWs lived on any provisions they had brought into Changi or discovered in camp stores. By the third week, the Japanese started to provide some rations, but other than a few scraps of meat, it was mainly rice. Rice was served in some form at every meal, but, since the grain had never been a staple of the European diet, the military cooks did not know how to prepare it properly, and the result was widespread constipation.

Water. Many POWs were already suffering from dysentery after drinking contaminated water. Changi's water mains had been destroyed during the battle for Singapore; therefore, the only water available was at a few underground well "water points." Twelve days after the start of the POWs' incarceration, 800 cases of dysentery from drinking contaminated water were reported in Roberts Hospital.⁴ Until the mains could be repaired, water had to be rationed to one full bottle a day per soldier (and "every drop had to be boiled or chlorinated").⁵ The only water available for washing up, outside of a daily communal bowl, was the sea, so small groups made trips to the garrison's bathing beach at Fairy Point. On these outings, other useful items might be found. In order to survive, the POWs became expert scavengers.



FIGURE 1.2. CHANGI POWs BATHING AND SCAVENGING. WATERCOLOR BY ROBERT BRAZIL.
COURTESY OF ROBERT BRAZIL.

¹ These were the Selarang Barracks Area (Australian Imperial Forces 8th Division); Birdwood Camp and the Garden & Woods Area (British 11th Indian Division); the India Lines Area (British 18th Infantry Division); the Southern Area [Singapore Fortress Command, which included Fortress Signals, Straits Settlements Volunteer Forces Brigade (S.S.V.F.), Federated Malay States Volunteer Forces (F.M.S.V.F.), the Royal Army Service Corps (R.A.S.C.), the Royal Army Medical Corps (R.A.M.C.), other smaller formations, as well as the abandoned indigenous settlement, Changi Village]; and the Command Area (Malaya Command, 3rd Indian Army Corp, headquarters for the 9th and 11th Indian Divisions, and the I. J. A. POW Administration).

Fuel. As Rob Brazil's watercolor of the early days in Changi illustrates, wood for cooking fires was more easily obtained.ⁱⁱ There was also wood available from bomb-damaged buildings, and when that ran out, there were plenty of trees in the heavily wooded garrison that could be cut down for fuel.

Morale

When the POWs entered Changi, it was clear to Staff Captain Gibby Inglefield that everyone was suffering from "utter depression, of failure, or wasted energy and useless loss of life."⁶ Changi was now filled with thousands of men with nothing to do but argue endlessly about the conduct of the war and the humiliation of the surrender or complain about their confinement and meager rations—especially the rice, lack of water, inadequate housing, and re-imposition of military discipline. Solving this morale problem was also top priority.

"To Keep the Community Occupied"

The standard military response to morale problems was articulated by Inglefield: "to keep the community occupied and to make use of whatever leisure hours it had to the best advantage. Inactivity is almost worse than discomfort to a P.O.W., and more damaging to morale."⁷ One immediate way to keep the troops busy was to put them to work on essential camp duties.⁸

But of the 52,200 POWs in Changi, only so many could work on fatigue duties at any one time. The rest had to be employed in "make-work" duties, such as picking up leaves on the *padangs*ⁱⁱⁱ or endless close-order drill practice—activities that would not endear the leaders to their troops. George McNeilly, the YMCA representative serving with the Australians, was among those who realized that camp fatigues would not do enough to address the issue:

A man who is working hard has little time while actively engaged to brood over the harshness of the fate that causes him to be so employed. . . . But all this was merely physical labour; and though it could fill some part of the day for everybody [it] could not fill the whole of the day for all: nor did it provide the mental stimulus which was necessary to provide food for thought in the non working hours or serve as an anodyne, or distraction to divert the mind from brooding over the present situation.⁹

The military had developed other more creative ways of maintaining troop morale. A pamphlet entitled "The Soldier's Welfare," issued by the War Office in London in 1941 and disseminated to all unit welfare officers, laid out suggestions for sports and games, entertainment, and education.¹⁰

Books found in abandoned barracks and base housing were collected in central locations and divisional libraries started.¹¹ Prisoners with academic degrees or expertise in some field were encouraged to deliver lectures and form classes that could take place during the day for those not assigned fatigue duties. Out of these endeavors, a "Changi University" sprang up in each area.¹² Because of Gibby Inglefield's

ⁱⁱ Robert Brazil is one of the numerous artists who documented the POWs' lives with drawings and watercolors. Prior to enlistment he had studied art at Goldsmiths College in London. Before leaving England, Brazil glued his watercolors into a tobacco tin so that he could take them with him. The lid would function as the palette. When he was interviewed fifty-nine years later, Brazil still had his tobacco tin and paints.

ⁱⁱⁱ Open areas used for drill practice and playing fields.

background and musical abilities—he had already formed a choir that sang at Sunday chapel—he was “appointed ‘Professor’ to the Faculty of Music” in the 18th Division’s “university.”¹³ Arts and crafts classes were also instituted and periodic exhibitions scheduled.

But the most troubling time of day—when boredom set in and morale was at its lowest ebb—was the POWs’ leisure time between the evening meal and “lights out.” To help fill these hours, pick-up games of soccer and other sports were initiated, although they had not been authorized by the Japanese. Even so, sports, lectures, classes, and arts and crafts proved insufficient to dispel the general malaise. For Charles Frisby, a trombone player in one of the military bands, the solution was obvious: “there was nothing more calculated to sustain the morale of the men than to set before them a form of activity which, under normal circumstances, they would expect to experience.”¹⁴ He referred to entertainment provided by concert parties.

In fact, it hadn’t taken long for someone to start community singing to fill those evening hours—as had happened during basic training and on transport ships during the long voyage to the Far East. Anyone with a musical instrument, as William Wilder quickly discovered, was considered a valuable asset: “When I got back to my bed an officer wanted to start a sing-song to the accompaniment of my tin whistle. Played for an hour and quite a cheerful time was had by all.”¹⁵

Group singing (“sing-songs” or “sing-alongs”) after the evening meal became something the POWs looked forward to each day, “For then we could bear to be reminded of home,” wrote one other ranks soldier.¹⁶ This assessment wasn’t true for everyone: “far from making us happy,” Thomas Pounder wrote, “these sing-songs only served to make us more miserable as memories of home, happy days and freedom flashed though our minds.”¹⁷

To keep the men’s spirits going through the long months of incarceration ahead, Malaya Command knew the POWs needed more than impromptu sing-alongs. Organized entertainment produced on a regular basis could go a long way to fill the men’s leisure hours. And given that performances created a common bond among audience members, they could help the men adjust collectively, as well as individually, to the reality of their newfound status as prisoners of war.

When permission for organized leisure activities was sought from the Japanese, the initial response was not positive. The conquerors felt it inappropriate for men who had suffered the shame of defeat to be engaged in such activities as sports and entertainment. They were convinced otherwise, according to Aussie George Sprod, “when our commandant, intrepid ‘Black Jack’ Galleghan, put it to them that a few such diversions would deter the prisoners from indulging in evil thoughts, such as escaping.”^{iv18}

The Reorganization of Divisional Concert Parties

Once permission was granted, each division was encouraged to establish an entertainment committee and a concert party. The officer in charge of the concert party would have “full authority to draw on the best talent available” from the various units within the division.¹⁹ Performances were to take place six days a week after the evening meal and before lights out, but not on Sundays. Each entertainment committee could determine how its concert party could best serve the men in its area with regard to the location and how often programs should change. In order to have time to produce the shows, “members of the concert party were excused all other duties.”^{v20}

This latter provision elicited more than one grouching comment from POWs about what they saw

^{iv} Galleghan represented the A.I.F., but he wasn’t the only officer present at this meeting.

^v Release time from camp duties was also extended to the lecturers in Changi’s fledgling universities.

as preferential treatment, but those voices were quickly silenced by others who understood its necessity. Producing “rattling good shows”²¹ every week, or every other week, or even once a month would be an enormous challenge requiring huge amounts of talent, skill, stamina, perseverance—and luck. Happily, what transpired in response was, in Jack Chalker’s words, a “releasing and discovering [of] great creative talent.”²²

To find material for their shows, entertainers scoured divisional libraries, recycled every old song and comedy bit they knew, and dredged their collective memories to recall every stage show seen, every radio show heard, and every film viewed during their civilian lives.

Divisional Concert Parties

Of the five divisional concert parties formed in the spring of 1942, only the four that supplied entertainers to the Thailand-Burma railway become our focus here.^{vi} Three had been in operation before the war, and depending upon who had survived the battles for Malaya and Singapore, and in what condition, these concert parties would get a head start in reactivating their troupes and presenting shows.

“The A.I.F. Malayan Concert Party.” “On 11 March 1942, Major [Jim] Jacobs was asked to come forward and he, with the assistance of Lieut. Val Mack and Sergeant John Wood as the Entertainment Committee, reformed the AIF Concert Party,” recalled Corporal Leonard Stewart in his official report on the concert party, written in 1944.²³



FIGURE 1.3. MAJOR JAMES WILLIAM (JIM) JACOBS. VX 40983.



FIGURE 1.4. CAPTAIN VAL MACK.
PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF KERRIN FREY.

Jim “Hole-in-the-road” Jacobs (the nickname acquired from a comic sketch he performed) noted that all but three of the former “Digger” troupe were “still available. These men formed the nucleus of the new party, and to them we added many new performers whom we discovered in the camp.”²⁴

“The Optimists.” By contrast, only five members of the original 18th Division’s Optimists concert party had been located. Their popular magician, Fergus Ankorn, was in Roberts Hospital recovering from war wounds.

^{vi} As far as is known, no performers with the fifth group, “The Malayan Command Players,” were sent Up Country.



FIGURE 1.5. FERGUS ANCKORN. COURTESY OF FERGUS ANCKORN.

Anckorn had survived the battle for Singapore, but just barely. During one Japanese bombing attack, he had been driving a lorry:

And I got blown up. . . . The shrapnel came in—I got hit in the face; hit in the back . . . and the lorry was on fire, and I couldn't get out of it. So I went to open the door, and I saw my hand was hanging off—my right hand—this one. (That's why I wear this splint.) And so I couldn't open it [the door]. In the end I kicked the door open and I jumped. And when I was in midair, I was shot.... I got a bullet went through the back of my leg into my kneecap. And down I went.^{vii25}

The injury to his hand might have ended Anckorn's career as a magician, but an alert orderly managed to save it. (To hear how Anckorn's hand was saved and about his narrow escape during the Japanese massacre of patients in Alexandra Hospital, listen to **Audio Link 1.1**).

[Audio](#)



[1.1](#)

It was May before Anckorn was discharged from hospital and able to rejoin the Optimists. While recuperating, he learned to compensate for his shattered left knee by using a homemade pulley contraption. Later he taught himself to do card tricks with his left hand.²⁶

^{vii} Anckorn would later believe that he had been shot by friendly fire.

Of the several new recruits for the company, Aubrey King (tenor) and George Wall (bass-baritone) were professionally trained singers and Reginald Renison a classically trained pianist—additions that pleased music director Denis East, who had been a violinist in the London Philharmonic Orchestra.^{viii} Norman Pritchard, an architect in training pre-enlistment, became the company's stage manager.



FIGURE 1.6. NORMAN PRITCHARD. COURTESY OF NORMAN PRITCHARD.

“The P.O.W. WOWS.”^{ix} It is unclear who was responsible for the formation of “The P.O.W. WOWS Concert Party” in the 11th Indian Division’s Garden & Woods Area. Musical conductor “Ace” Connolly and his “Kings of Swing” orchestra (including songwriter Bob Gale), who had participated in a shipboard concert organized by Major Cary Owtram on their way out to Malaya, had been captured early in the war and incarcerated in Pudu Gaol in Kuala Lumpur.^{x27}

“The Southern Area Central Concert Party.” This concert party supplied a significant number of entertainers for the Thailand side of the railway—entertainers who remained together through most of the ensuing three and a half years—and thus will be examined more closely in terms of its personnel and productions.

The Southern Area Central Concert Party

The Artistic Team

The three key figures on the Southern Area’s entertainment committee were “General Manager and Stage Director” Major Leofric Thorpe of Singapore Fortress Signals, “Musical Director” Second Lieutenant Norman Smith, and “Producer” Corporal Leo Britt.^{xi28}

^{viii} Renison and East were both recruited by John Coast to teach music in the 18th Division’s university [Coast, 18].

^{ix} Another group of POW entertainers in Bicycle Camp on Java will call their group “The Pow-Wow Concert Party.”

^x This information comes from a recent interview with “Bunny” Austin who met Connolly and Gale while incarcerated in Pudu Gaol. He would later become a member of “Ace” Connolly’s band in Nong Pladuk [Callum Austin, “Interview with ‘Bunny’ Austin,” 29 August 2011].

^{xi} Others on the entertainment committee were Second Lieutenant R. Green as box office manager, Lieutenant P. Finch as stage manager—personnel, and Corporal H. Jones as stage manager—sets & properties.



FIGURE 1.7. LEOFRIC THORPE. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF DAVID AND CHRISTINE STYLES.

Leofric Thorpe had been posted from India to Singapore in September 1939. Soon after his arrival, he became involved with a local community theatre called The Island Committee, comprised of rubber brokers, tin miners, solicitors, and other British colonials as well as military personnel from the units stationed in and around Singapore. Besides functioning as the theatre's honorary secretary and treasurer, Thorpe also stage-managed several productions, including the *Fun Fare* concert parties that toured to Alexandra Military Hospital and Royal Artillery installations in June and August of 1941.

In late November 1941, he was the director, stage manager, and business manager for the "Stand Easy Concert Party" that toured Northern Malaya "to entertain the troops in the rubber."^{xii29} They were performing in Ipoh on 2 December when orders were received that all troops should return to barracks immediately. In his official report on the tour, submitted three days after the Japanese attack on 8 December,^{xiii} Thorpe wrote, "With the war being fought, there will be an even greater need now [for entertainment]. When the situation stabilizes, and the number of troops perhaps increase, no better way of maintaining the morale of the men could be tried. . . . Another show should start as soon as circumstances permit."³⁰ But the situation didn't stabilize and the circumstances didn't permit until after the British surrender.

^{xii} *Protecting the strategically valuable rubber plantations.*

^{xiii} 7 December in the United States.



FIGURE 1.8. NORMAN SMITH. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF CHRISTOPHER N. SMITH.

Norman Smith had been a dance band leader before the war. Because of his unusually large stature, he was described by John Durnford as an “enormous, cheerful figure” and John Coast would call him “the vast Norman Broad.”^{xiv31} Later, in Chungkai hospital camp in Thailand, Richard Sharp would write that his “brusque good nature and common sense smoothed many a situation.”³²



FIGURE 1.9. LEO BRITT.
PHOTOGRAPH DETAIL. *THE ARGUS*
(MELBOURNE), 7 JULY 1948.

xiv John Coast's memoir, Railroad of Death (1946), was one of the first works published about the Thailand-Burma railway. Unfortunately, Coast used pseudonyms for all the surnames of the British, Australian, and Dutch soldiers, fearing that what he had written might, in some cases, be considered libelous. His device has been a bane to all serious researchers. Yet most of his pseudonyms were cleverly devised to rhyme with the person's actual name ("Benson" for "Renison") or to describe a unique physical characteristic ("Norman Broad" for "Norman Smith"), so that those who had been there would know whom he was talking about. In this text, these pseudonyms have been restored to the individuals' real surnames whenever possible.

Leo Britt had been a professional actor in London's West End theatre before enlistment. He met Leofric Thorpe in September 1941 when performing in the Island Committee's production of *The Amazing Dr. Clitterhouse* that Thorpe had stage-managed. Given Britt's years of professional stage experience, Thorpe designated him the concert party's producer.

The Company

To get his new company off the ground, Thorpe first enlisted personnel from the two prewar theatrical organizations he'd been involved with. Those from the "Stand Easy" concert party were Arthur Butler and Frankie Quinton.

Old Faces. Lance Bombardier Arthur Butler had been well known in Singapore before the war as a female impersonator named "Gloria d'Earie." With his "delightful tenor voice," he sang on Singapore Radio every Sunday and at society birthday parties, and he even gave a command performance for the sultan of Johor.³³ "Butler was slim and gracious, with small features and ardent brown eyes," wrote Tom Wade. "He was always known as Gloria and the jokes about him were almost as numerous as they once use[d] to be about Mae West. It was said that when he gave an order to the gunmen in his artillery battery, they would always reply, "Yes, darling."^{xv34}



FIGURE 1.10. ARTHUR BUTLER AS "GLORIA D'EARIE"
IN FRONT OF HIS BILLET. IWM PHOTOGRAPH
ARCHIVE DOC 843. COURTESY OF R. T. KNIGHT &
PAMELA KNIGHT.

Another soldier remembered that Butler "undertook, on one occasion, to spend, dressed as a woman, an afternoon and evening in the city visiting Raffles Hotel^{xvi} and meeting people without being recognized as a man. And he got away with it."³⁵

^{xv} Given his stage name it must have really been, "Yes, dearie."

^{xvi} The most prestigious high-class hotel in Singapore.



FIGURE 1.11. FRANKIE QUINTON AND FRIENDS IN MALAYA PRIOR TO HOSTILITIES (FRANKIE QUINTON IS ON THE LEFT). COURTESY OF TOM BOARDMAN AND MRS. QUINTON.

The accordionist Frankie Quinton carried his instrument with him everywhere he went. “Frankie was a short, cheery laddie,” recalled Laurie Allison, “who only needed an audience to bring out his accordion and for hours would play any tune requested. If he didn’t know the tune, which was rarely, he would get the requester to hum it and then would pick up the melody. . . . However, being the cheery chappie he was, his theme song was ‘When You’re Smiling’ and smile songs featured predominantly in his playing.”³⁶ Frankie’s “instrument often wanted ‘patchin’ up,’” wrote Tom Boardman, who became a close friend, “and somehow he did it, and carried on with the show.”³⁷

Those enlisted in the concert party from the Island Committee were Lieutenant Jack McNaughton, Captain Wilfred Pearson, Captain Eric Griffith-Jones, and Lieutenant Terry Morris.

Jack McNaughton had been a professional actor in London revues before the war. With “much comedy experience and a mobile and highly expressive face,” he became the concert party’s leading comedian.³⁸



FIGURE 1.12. CAPTAIN WILFRED "FIZZER" PEARSON. COURTESY OF CHRISTOPHER N. SMITH.



FIGURE 1.13. CAPTAIN ERIC GRIFFITH-JONES. COURTESY OF CHRISTOPHER N. SMITH.



FIGURE 1.14. LIEUTENANT TERRY MORRIS. COURTESY OF TERRY MORRIS.

"Fizzer" Pearson was described by John Coast as "an amateur actor and comedian of great ability, and seemed equally at home acting a straight part in a play, a genial ass in a Musical Comedy, or on occasion he would get down to what he and his lyric-writer called 'the real, red-nose stuff.'"^{xvii39} According to Jack Chalker, he acquired the nickname "Fizzer" because of his "bubbling humour."⁴⁰

Eric Griffith-Jones had appeared with Britt in *The Amazing Dr. Clitterhouse*. He and Pearson became close friends and would stick together until liberation.

Between 10 May and 21 August 1941, Terry Morris had appeared in three Island Committee productions, including Thorpe's *Fun Fare* tours. He was typecast by Thorpe to play "young 'boyish' parts."⁴¹

New Faces. Once the "old faces" were on board, Thorpe auditioned other possible participants from the varied constituencies in the Southern Area. One of the new faces was Bobby Spong, a female impersonator who had already made a name for himself as a performer in his unit's shows.

^{xvii} Farce.



FIGURE 1.15. BOBBY SPONG. *WONDER BAR*
PHOTOGRAPH DETAIL. COURTESY OF MARTIN
PERCIVAL.

Thorpe recalled Spong's repertoire: "His favorite two numbers were 'I'm an old Norman Castle with a ruined Tudor wing. Ten architects have had a hand in me,' and 'A tisket, a tasket, my little yellow basket.' I have heard him sing them a hundred times."^{xviii42}

Butler and Spong would be the company's top female impersonators. When the troops saw these two "glamorous" figures on stage, Tom Wade noted that their reactions were both ecstatic and erotic:

These two young men, slinkily dressed and well made-up, caused immeasurable happiness to thousands of prisoners. They were frankly adored. In POW camp we had no heroes: no war heroes, political heroes, sport heroes. The only people about whom there was any glamour were the actors and most idolised of these were the female impersonators. Crowds escorted them from stage door to their barracks each evening. I often heard troops say, "If Gloria were a woman I could really go for her," and others, "I had a wonderful dream about Bobby Spong last night."⁴³

Musicians. While Thorpe was recruiting comics and singers, Norman Smith was scouting out musicians and instruments for his "Melody Makers" orchestra. Among the troops who entered Changi as POWs were members of several different regimental bands and orchestral units. During combat they had served as stretcher bearers. In addition, there were soldiers like Tom Boardman who carried musical

^{xviii} Thorpe went on to write, "The first of these songs, with its double entendre, was made popular by the famous British female impersonator, Douglas Byng in the 1930s. The second was a children's song which had been given an early 1940s American swing treatment [by Ella Fitzgerald] and could easily—and at times did—have additional, or altered, lyrics that made sarcastic references to their captors" [Thorpe, *Fax*, 23 June 2000]. Norman Smith recalled that Spong also "impersonated Beatrice Lillie. 'She' had a complete repertoire of solo numbers such as 'Love for Sale' and 'Falling in love again' and 'See what the boys in the back room will have,' the latter two, of course as Marlene Dietrich" [Norman Smith, 18–19].

instruments for their own enjoyment and that of their barrack mates.



FIGURE 1.16. TOM BOARDMAN IN MALAYA BEFORE THE WAR. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF TOM BOARDMAN.

Whatever musical instruments the Changi musicians didn't have they would try to make. Tom Boardman lost his "bongulele"^{xix} during the battle for Singapore, so he constructed a small ukulele out of scrap wood with signal wire for strings and "gears" from a "badly broken mandolin" found in a village hut on work detail.^{xx} The Optimists' Denis East lost his violin as well, and after much trial and error a new one was constructed.^{xxi}

Before Smith was done recruiting, he had acquired fifteen musicians along with a collection of instruments.^{xxii} Two pianos were commandeered from military clubs or married quarters. Preparing musical scores for his orchestra was an arduous task: "All the band parts had to be handwritten and the scores done from memory," wrote Smith. "I had lots of assistance from army musicians used to copying music and the music teacher-pianist, Lieutenant Eric Cliffe^{xxiii} contributed several pieces all of which had to be suitably arranged for the rather unbalanced orchestra I had collected together."^{xxiv}

"It must have taken about a month," Thorpe remembered, "to get the cast and orchestra and others together and rehearse the first show."^{xxv}

First Divisional Productions

On 18 March 1942^{xxvi}—one month after surrender—the A.I.F. Malayan Concert Party was once again on tour, "but this time around the [Selarang] Barrack square, and adjacent areas," wrote Corporal Stewart. "Each camp or unit had built its own platform staging, and the party did the rounds of these 'theatres' once a week with a change of programme."^{xxvii} The variety shows were brief, lasting no more than thirty to forty minutes so they could visit as many units as possible "after the evening meal and before the

^{xix} A combination bongo and ukulele.

^{xx} These were four violins, two flutes, two clarinets, a saxophone, an oboe, two trumpets, two piano accordions, two Spanish guitars, two pianofortes, and percussion.

^{xxi} Cliffe had been on the piano faculty at the London Academy of Music.

^{xxii} The date is from Val Mack's production logbooks and confirmed by Major Jacobs' statement in his autobiography that their first show took place a week after the formation of the company. In his report, Stewart gives the first performance date as 19 March.

sun set.”⁵⁰

The P.O.W. Wows and Optimists presented their first productions three days later. The *1st Edition* of the P.O.W. Wows’ variety show was performed for the troops in the Garden & Woods section at the base of a natural amphitheatre dubbed “the Rice Bowl Theatre.” The show was also toured to troops across the way in Birdwood Camp. New “editions” of the show were produced every two weeks.

In contrast, the first of the Optimists’ monthly shows, *Rice and Shine: A Topical Revue*, was performed indoors in an atap hut that had previously been a dining hall.⁵¹ Since everyone was sick to death of their rice diet, the pun in the title was cheeky. As the subtitle indicates, the show was filled with topical humor, in monologues (“Rumours,” “Ode to Rice”) and sketches (“Food Fracas,” “The Soldier’s Return”).

“The Soldier’s Return” was the Optimists’ version of a comic sketch that had originated in First World War concert parties. It satirized the misunderstanding that occurs when a soldier comes home from the front after a long absence and uses military terminology and jargon not understood by his wife or family. The climax involves the soldier’s discovery that he is the father of a newborn baby boy—clearly not his. In the long tradition of barracks humor that “busted” what the audience held most dear, the POWs at this point could laugh about this soldier’s unfortunate fate. Two years later, a repeat of this sketch in Chungkai hospital camp in Thailand would get the producer in a great deal of trouble.

The Southern Area Troops Central Concert Party opened the first of its monthly productions, *Red, Bright and Blue: A New Laughing Revusical*,^{xxiii} on 14 April in what had been an open-air Chinese Opera playhouse-cum-cinema in Changi Village.⁵² As Leofric Thorpe had been stationed in Changi before the war, he knew the camp well, and once assigned to the Southern Area, he commandeered the abandoned theatre and set about renovating it: “I, of course, managed to get a hold of school desks and benches and tiered benches came from a cricket field just before it went out of bounds, so we seated about 2000. . . . I was able to get my own curtains from Singapore^{xxiv} via one of the working or ration parties.”⁵³

In recognition of a well-known variety theatre in London, it was called “the Pavilion Theatre.” When D. S. Cave attended the theatre, he was amazed by its professional look: “Around the façade of the Pavilion were hoardings showing the cast, strung on painted palms in true theatre style.”⁵⁴

^{xxiii} As the name suggests, a revusical was a hybrid form, but in actuality the term was more of a publicity gimmick to pull into the theatre audiences expecting to see something new.

^{xxiv} From the Island Committee.



FIGURE 1.17. Program cover for *RED, BRIGHT AND BLUE*.
IWM 65/144/1.

Red, Bright and Blue was written and produced by Leo Britt but staged by Leofric Thorpe. Among the thirteen sketches and musical numbers on the playbill were “Latest News: Official Rumourtism” (a satire of the insidious rumor mill); Gloria d’Earie’s strip-tease act, “Nina Pulloffski: The Beautiful Spy”; and “Black Fantasie,” a “Concerto Negro Spirituals” by “The Savoyard Singers.” Following tradition, the show closed with everyone standing and singing the national anthem.

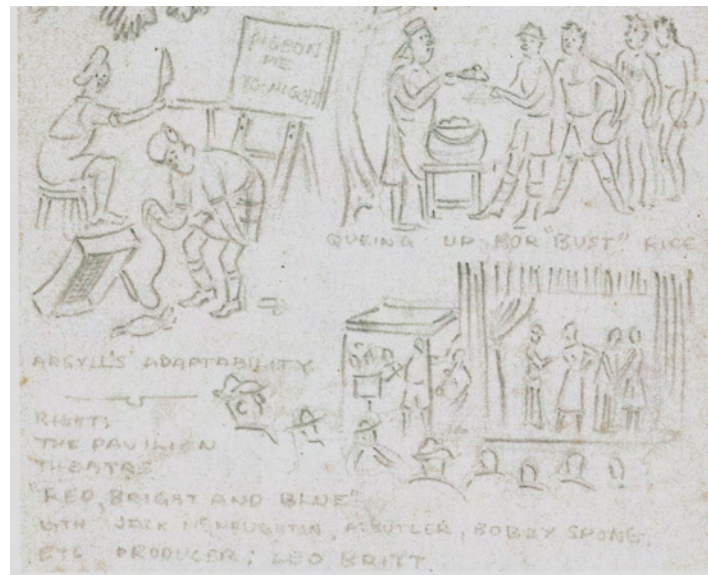


FIGURE 1.18. “CHANGI SCENES” DETAIL. CHARLES A. SIMPSON. IWM ART 15592 [8].

A detail from Charles Simpson's cartoon "Changi Scenes" shows the Pavilion Theatre with performers on stage and Norman Smith's orchestra under the marquee at audience left (see **Figure 1.19** for the complete cartoon in the Image Gallery).

Item ten on the playbill was a very pointed topical sketch, "The Men who Stayed Behind: Penalties for Desertion."^{xxv} According to R. J. Godber, it showed "the absolute imbecility of the High Command." One actor was made up "to look just like General Keith Simmonds," the Singapore Fortress Command G.O.C.,^{xxvi} who attended one performance along with General Percival of Malaya Command and other senior officers and staff⁵⁵—a performance Thorpe remembered:

I well remember a satirical sketch with Jack McNaughton as a Colonel staff officer "Colonel Mango," Fizzer as the Adjutant "Capt. White-teeth," Terry Morris, and another (I forget who). The Colonel was told that Ululand had invaded Blunderland, and the Col asked which side they were on—Blunderland of course. After a lot of very witty dialogue, which made no secret of the ballsup which had taken place, they ended with a song and dance. . . . General Percival came of course to see the show, and I watched his reaction with great interest through the curtains; he took the ribbing very well.⁵⁶

Another member of the delegation from Malaya Command was Other Ranks John Sharp of Command Signals Headquarters. This performance was the first he had seen in captivity, and the brief comment he made on it in his diary was the first of many during the next three and a half years: "Went to concert in Changi Village—several good sketches and a female impersonator, with an amusing news bulletin."^{xxvii57}

Censorship

As the Optimists' and Southern Area's shows illustrate, the false rumors that tormented the men, the unpalatable rice, and the debacle of losing Malaya and Singapore provided fertile ground for the comedians' caustic wit—and would continue to do so. This line of humor would be endured as long as it wasn't perceived to cross the line and undermine morale.

The Japanese did not attend the POWs' musical and theatrical productions during that first year in Changi, and the only instance of their censorship was an order issued two months after concert parties were up and running that forbade the singing of the British national anthem because it might inspire patriotic thoughts in defeated men. To satisfy the need for some sort of rousing patriotic-like number, concert party producers substituted "Land of Hope and Glory" instead, which seemed satisfactory to the I. J. A.⁵⁸

With no requirement to submit scripts to Japanese censors for approval, the shows were replete with attempts by the POW comedians to get back at their captors by mocking what they saw as peculiar

^{xxv} "Very pointed" because just before capitulation, General Archibald Wavell, Commander-in-Chief of the combined American-British-Dutch-Australian Command, fled Singapore by flying boat to escape capture. His last orders to the officers and men left behind were a reiteration of Churchill's that Singapore must be defended to the last man. Many POWs interpreted Wavell's escape as desertion.

^{xxvi} General Officer Commanding—the title for the general at the top of the division's command structure.

^{xxvii} Before mobilization, John Sharp had been in training as a librarian and carried these interests and skills into captivity with him, establishing lending libraries in several of the Thailand camps. His voluminous diary is one of the most extraordinary documents to come out of the Second World War in the Far East. It is a blend of factual and gossip information that gives the reader a feel for the day-to-day existence of an other ranks POW. Immediately after the war, Sharp transcribed the miniscule handwriting in his original diary onto the lined pages of twelve school exercise books totaling 1,293 pages. A separate exercise book contains an index of subjects and names with the pertinent pages in the main diary. These now reside in the Imperial War Museum.

customs and/or racial and physical characteristics. When one of these turns was performed, there were always lookouts posted to avoid surprise by an unannounced Japanese patrol. When the Japanese later started to attend POW shows Up Country, censorship rules were quickly imposed—challenging the entertainers to find clever ways to subvert them.

“Entertainment Everywhere”

As troops in each area were only allowed to attend their division’s shows on a rotation basis, there could be long gaps in time before they got to see another one. This situation proved intolerable, and to fill these gaps more entertainment was encouraged at the regiment and battalion level—in fact, anywhere a large number of POWs were stationed for any length of time. Keith Wilson noted an important difference in the status of these new unit or work site performers: “Unlike the chaps who performed in the main concert party, who were excused other duties, our performers worked during the day and had little time to rehearse or put acts together.”⁵⁹ Before long there were so many concert parties operating in Changi that John Lane observed, “There was entertainment everywhere.”⁶⁰

Unit Concert Parties

One of the new unit concert parties was in the Selarang Area, where Jack Turner, a member of the 2/2nd Transport Company, took on the role of female impersonator. One song he sang during his act was “The Singapore Retreat,” a parody written by Frank L. Huston of Tommy Tucker’s popular song “The Man That Comes Around.” The first verse gives an example of the song’s satirical sting:

*There’s the man that said that Singapore shall not, must not fall,^{xxviii}
He pushed us in the scrum and he left us with the ball.
We’ll resist them on the land, repel them everywhere,
But little did we realise, his words were all hot air.⁶¹*

Huston also wrote a number of other parodies for Turner based on old music hall songs (see the lyrics for all these songs in “The FEPOW Songbook”).

Work Site Concert Parties

Toward the end of March, the Japanese ordered thousands of POWs from Changi to work sites in Singapore and environs. Their job was to clean up debris from the bombing campaign and restore essential services. Some of the men were assigned to day jobs where they moved from place to place as needed and returned to Changi each night. Others were sent to locations such as River Valley Road or the docks at Keppel Harbour, where they would stay for several months. It was at these long-term work sites that concert parties were initiated.^{xxix}

River Valley Road. River Valley Road Camp functioned as the field hospital for the working

^{xxviii} Prime Minister Winston Churchill had ordered that Singapore be held at all cost.

^{xxix} Besides River Valley Road and Keppel Harbour, concert parties were created in the work camps at Adam Park, Caldecott Hill Estate, The Great World, Havelock Road, Serangoon Road, Sime Road, and Towner Road.

parties in and around Singapore. It was located on the edge of Singapore Town just across a stream from Havelock Road Camp, situated in the heart of Chinatown.



FIGURE 1.20. LEN GIBSON AND FRIENDS IN LIVERPOOL BEFORE EMBARKATION. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF LEN GIBSON.

Len Gibson and three mates from the Highland Regiments, Michael Conlin, Charley Carney, and Johnny Glancy, organized concert parties in the camp.⁶² Jack Chalker, who had been transferred to River Valley from Havelock Road after contracting malaria, drew a pencil sketch of the “Gaiety Theatre” they built at one end of a hut.^{xxx}

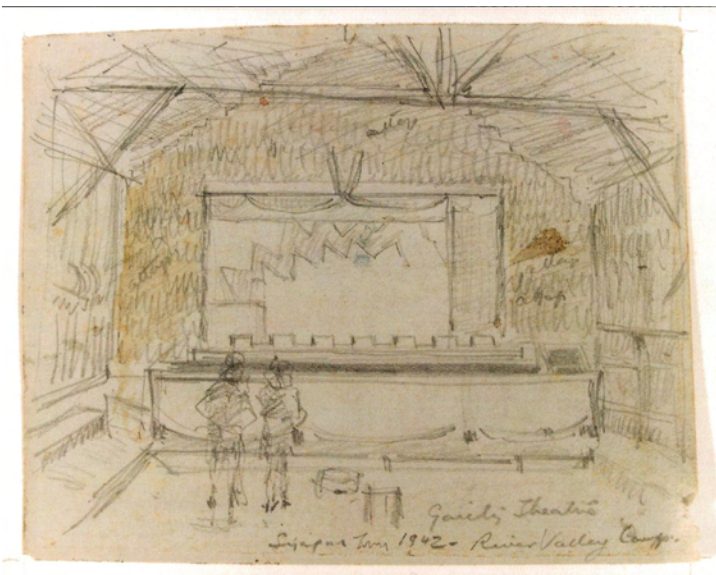


FIGURE 1.21. THE GAIETY THEATRE. JACK CHALKER. COURTESY OF JACK CHALKER.

^{xxx} Jack Chalker had been an art student preparing to take up his post-graduate scholarship at the Royal College of Art when his induction notice came. With his powerful drawings documenting the tropical diseases suffered by the POWs in Thailand, the ingenious medical practices used to combat them, and daily life on the Thailand-Burma railway, Chalker became one of the best-known railway war artists. He would also become significantly involved in the entertainment Up Country.

Keppel Harbour. The POWs posted to the docks at Keppel Harbour—Singapore's port of entry—worked as stevedores loading and unloading cargo from ships and turning the Singapore Police Station into an I. J. A. headquarters. Jimmy Walker, who had produced a show aboard the transport ship on the way out to Malaya, was asked by welfare officer Lieutenant John D. V. Allum to organize weekly shows. Sergeant Major “Tug” Wilson volunteered to perform and write songs as well. With a nod to their locale (and to the popular song), they called themselves “The Harbour Lights Concert Party.”

Walker recalled how they converted one of their godowns, or warehouses, into a theatre:

Under cover of darkness, we sawed off lamps and fittings from under the eaves of Godown 21 within the camp's perimeter. We “laid on” electricity and the lamps, gaily painted, became our footlights. Bales of cotton stolen from Godown 21 were transformed into curtains and scenery cleverly painted by Lieutenant Greig. Every item, every costume and prop was stolen at the risk of someone's life. The mechanism to dim the lights was once the innards of an electric fan in Jap. H.Q., formerly Singapore Police Station.⁶³

“Every Wednesday,” Walker wrote, “the men would dash for a place in the ‘theatre’ for their one spasm of entertainment. . . . The ‘hit’ song of each episode became the song echoing through the camp for the following week. We heard no others.”⁶⁴

To be a complete success, the troupe had to find somebody willing “to put a skirt on”—i.e., become a female impersonator—“so when a look-alike Carmen Miranda danced gracefully on stage,” Walker wrote, “hope danced as well. Her swirling coloured skirt was once a mosquito-net, her bra, two twisted towels and her head-dress out-Mirandered Miranda! Her dancing was the performance that two Jap guards dashed back-stage and caused ‘Carmen’ to undress completely and reveal a laughing signalman, Johnny Mutton!”⁶⁵

This kind of mistaken identity by Japanese guards would plague the female impersonators wherever they performed, either in Changi or Up Country. Each episode would usually end with the indignant performer lifting up his skirt to reveal the fact that he was, unequivocally, male.

Jimmy Walker, Hank Phillips, and Bert Compton became the Harbour Lights’ comedians. Their most popular sketch was “Smiles on the Nile.”⁶⁶

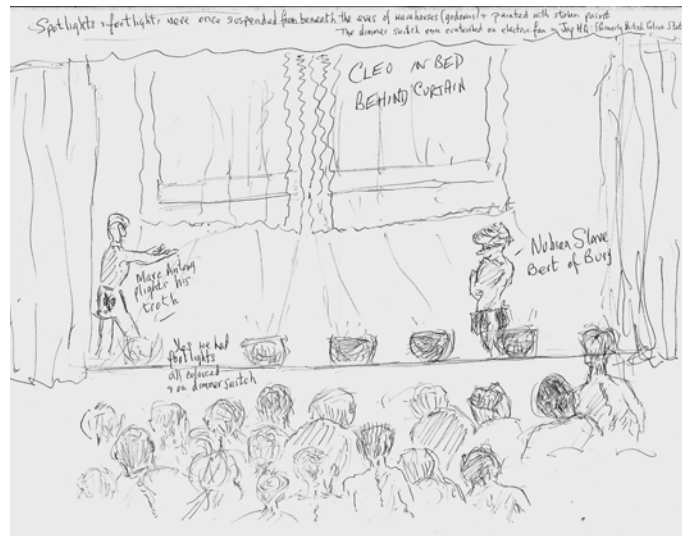


FIGURE 1.22. "SMILES ON THE NILE" ON STAGE IN THE KEPPEL HARBOUR THEATRE. JIMMY WALKER. COURTESY OF JIMMY WALKER.

(To hear Walker narrate this sketch and other variety acts and how costumes were produced from scrounged materials, listen to **Audio 1.2**.)

[Audio](#)



[1.2](#)

More problematic for the entertainers, whether at work sites or in Changi, would be acquiring costumes and makeup, but as Thorpe's and Walker's accounts reveal, the POWs proved very resourceful. "It was admirable the way tailors and carpenters provided such colourful and attractive costumes and props," wrote Tom Wade. "We all contributed what we could in the way of brightly coloured clothing or civilian hats, but most of these things and other like dresses were brought in from working parties in Singapore, always on the look-out for such valuables."⁶⁷ For female impersonators like Jack Turner, makeup items like "rouge, face powder, lipstick and creams were obtained from former Australian nurses' trunks which were left on the Island when they evacuated Singapore."⁶⁸ When that supply ran out, chemists in the prisoners' midst would concoct substitutes.

Camp Bulletin 05/42: Re Up Country Construction Project

In early May, I. J. A. headquarters notified Malaya Command that 8,000 POWs would be sent from Changi to Up Country locations to work on a huge construction project, rumored to be a railway. The first of these drafts, known as "A Force" and composed of 3,000 Australians under the command of Brigadier General A. L. Varley, embarked by ship to Burma on 14 May.

Among them were Major Jim Jacobs, formerly officer in charge of the A.I.F. Malayan Concert Party, Bandmaster Norman Whittaker with his 2/18th Infantry Battalion's Brass Band (including all their instruments), and female impersonator Jack Turner. Many Australian POWs volunteered to go on these

drafts in order to stay with their mates as well as to get out of Changi's stultifying atmosphere.^{xxx} The Japanese had led them to believe that food and living conditions would be better Up Country. They would soon learn otherwise.

"The Mummie Bees"

The British POWs in the other areas of Changi were unaffected by this evacuation of Australian troops. Once their concert party was established, Thorpe and Britt imposed a rigorous repertory-style rehearsal and performance schedule on the company in the Southern Area: "We played a musical show 6 nights a week, rehearsing the one which would follow during the daytime, and writing, orchestrating, and planning the one to follow that during the evening until late at night."⁶⁹

Their new show, *Hellsabuzzin'!*, was Britt's rewrite of Lupino and Eyton's popular West End musical comedy *Runaway Love*, with topical references (Britt had been in a tour of the show back in Britain, so he knew it thoroughly).^{xxxii70} Musical comedies of the 1930s differed from revues more in degree than in kind. They had tighter plots, more developed characters, and music more integral to the action. To identify the musical theatre troupe and its shows from other Southern Area productions, such as orchestral concerts, the group was christened "The Mummie Bees."

Among the new performers added to the company was John "Nellie" Wallace, who had studied ballet prior to the war. As he was willing to "put a skirt on," Wallace gave the company a much-needed third female impersonator. His campy acting style got him typecast by Thorpe as "a low comedienne."⁷¹ With the success of this second show, Leo Britt's reputation as a quality producer began to grow—and so did his ego.

Something New / Something Different

When concert parties started in March, "Every joke, every grotesque gesture, every sly dig at the Japanese, many of whom would be standing on the fringe of the crowd, sullen and frowning, provoked frantic cheering and laughter," explained Hew Crawford.⁷² But after more than two months of variety and revue-type shows, some performers were dissatisfied with this format and its content. There was also need for a wider variety of entertainment to appeal to other segments and tastes in the vast POW community.

In the Optimists, classically trained singers George Wall and Aubrey King and musicians Denis East and Reginald Renison felt their talents were being wasted. They wanted to give themselves, and their audiences, an alternative to the popular songs, show tunes, and farcical sketches. So when the run of their current show ended, the company disbanded, and they, along with accordionist Fred Coles, formed the "Quo Fata Vocant"^{xxxiii} ensemble to perform concerts of light classical music. Other Optimists performers like Fergus Anckorn became "free agents," available to any producer in the area. After a successful debut on 29 May, the ensemble began to tour different venues in the 18th Division.

Another response to demands for variety in programming was the 18th Division's formation of "The New Windmill Players"—a dramatics group that presented plays on a renovated stage in the ballroom of a recreational center renamed the New Windmill Theatre.^{xxxiv73} Its sets were designed by other ranks cartoonist Ronald Searle.

^{xxx} But their commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel "Black Jack" Galleghan, steadfastly refused to allow any other members of the concert party to volunteer for these drafts. They were to stay in Changi to keep up the morale of his troops there. For this reason, there is little in this chapter about the marvelous Australian performers or the series of shows they produced under the guidance of Captain Val Mack, who was given a field promotion to run the company when Major Jacobs was sent away.

^{xxxii} The new title was "borrowed" from Olsen and Johnson's wacky and surreal 1941 movie, *Hellzapoppin*.

^{xxxiii} "Whither the fates call": motto of the Royal Northumberland Fusiliers.

^{xxxiv} The windmill was a reference not only to the unit "flash" [emblem] worn on their uniforms but to the famous London theatre that was kept open during "the Blitz."

In the Southern Area, the need was met by the development of two smaller production companies. Leofric Thorpe's *The Weekenders* performed on Sundays,^{xxxv} when the Mumming Bees had their one day off. "It had no real rehearsal," wrote Thorpe, "but was not at all bad and [had] chaps like Sam Drayton who sang in one of the big London bands. He was very wooden in appearance so I put a microphone in front of him consisting of a boot polish tin with a wire to it which the Japs inspected very carefully."⁷⁴ *The Weekenders* proved to be enormously popular. Whereas audiences for the main shows were booked on a rotation basis, the "Sunday shows were first come, first in—you can imagine the rush weekly."^{xxxvi75}

Leo Britt's *Café Colette*, on the other hand, was a tour show devised so it could be performed anywhere in the Southern Area during the week. "Leo put on shows during the day with no help at all. They were done at any convenient place, always a different one. . . . It consisted of three or four rhythm sections conducted by Leo, one or two singers, and an occasional man dragged up from the audience."⁷⁶ Britt's band leader character was called "Maestro," and since this title seemed to fit his personality and style, everyone started to address him this way.

Camp Bulletin 18-26/6/42: Re More Up Country Evacuations

The call for additional drafts to complete the I. J. A.'s request for 8,000 POWs for Up Country duty was finally received. Between 18 and 26 June, 3,000 POWs from various divisions in Changi were transported in railway boxcars to Thailand. Designated "Mainland No. 1 Work Party," this advance group would construct the supply depot and maintenance base camp at Nong Pladuk and the staging camp at Ban Pong. It would also lay the track from Ban Pong to the provincial city of Kanchanaburi in preparation for the start of major construction.

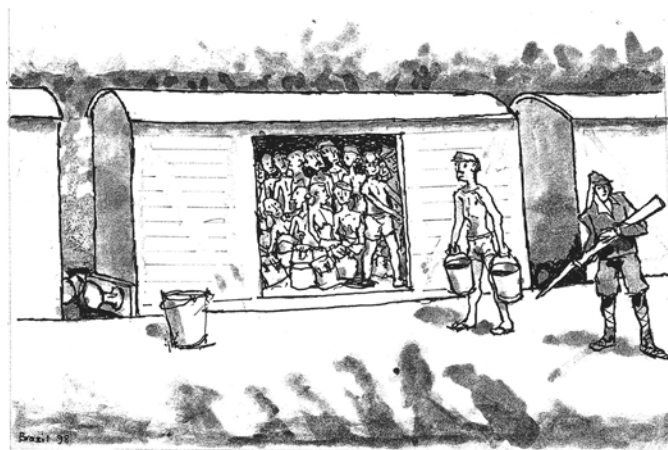


FIGURE 1.23. TRANSPORT TO THAILAND. ROBERT BRAZIL. COURTESY OF ROBERT BRAZIL.

Major Cary Owtram and others from Birdwood Camp were part of this draft, as was Norman Pritchard from the 18th Division and John Sharp from Malaya Command Signals Headquarters.

^{xxxv} In the interest of keeping morale up, the ban on Sunday performances had been lifted.

^{xxxvi} But Thorpe's agreement to let the padre use the theatre for Sunday services created a problem: "He asked me if he might have a service before the show and I said it would bring in a good congregation. It started with about 50 worshipers and then people realised it was the way to get good seats at the show, and hundreds turned up. The Padre had rigged up a small bamboo altar and found someone sitting on it. He remonstrated but was told, 'Bugger the fucking altar; I've come to the show!' So it ceased to be a church" [Thorpe, Letter, 24 May 2000].

“Fizzer’s Flute”

Once again, the evacuation of these additional 3,000 troops had little impact on the vast number of POWs who remained in Changi, although rumors circulating about more overseas drafts added to their uncertainty about the future. With Leo Britt occupied touring *Café Colette*, comedian Jack McNaughton produced the Mummie Bees’ new “non-stop revue,” *New Pins and Needles*, which ran during June in the Southern Area.^{xxxvii}

One item on the bill was “Fizzer” Pearson’s solo turn, “Balalaika,” that contained his first performance of a song especially written for him by Leslie “Biggles” Bywaters to music by Norman Smith. The first verse gives a good idea of Bywaters’ gifts as a lyricist, especially for double entendre:

*Behold in me a member of the Oswaldtwistle band,
When you hear my music you will think it simply grand.
I told my wife that playing second fiddle was the cause
Of much of our unhappiness, she answered without pause,
You’re lucky to be in the band at all with an instrument like yours.
(Flute).⁷⁷*

“Fizzer’s Flute” would become Pearson’s signature song, repeated many times Up Country.^{xxxviii}

On the back page of the show’s souvenir program was an announcement of Britt’s imminent return to the Pavilion stage with a new production: André Charlot’s musical *Wonder Bar* (Britt had been in the cast of the original West End production). As a musical comedy with scenes taking place indoors and out at a ski resort in St. Moritz, Switzerland, it would need extensive rewriting before being presented to Changi audiences.

More Entertaining Solutions

By the sixth month in captivity, participation in sports had fallen off due to the inadequate diet. As a consequence, dependence on entertainment intensified, which meant additional viewing opportunities had to be found. One solution was to grant touring concert parties like the P.O.W. Wows permission to travel outside the boundaries of their area. With the addition of Padre John Foster-Haigh as officer in charge, the Quo Fata Vocant ensemble began to tour other areas as the “Changi Celebrity Artists.”^{xxxix}

Another solution was to allow officers to take their men to see shows in other areas. To accommodate them, concert parties performing in theatres, like the Mummie Bees, would need to extend their run. With this expectation in mind, Leo Britt put aside his prep on *Wonder Bar* and produced instead *Pass The Nuts: A New Screamlined and Nutty Revue*, which ran during July and August.

As the Mummie Bees’ company now numbered approximately fifty-two people, including administrative personnel, performers, stage technicians, and an orchestra of fifteen, *Pass the Nuts* was Britt’s biggest show yet.⁷⁸ The finale was a spectacular “Blood and Sand” sketch that had more than twenty

^{xxxvii} The “old” *Pins and Needles* had been a very popular London revue that had opened in 1921 and gone through numerous yearly “editions.”

^{xxxviii} Other verses from this risqué song will be found in later chapters.

^{xxxix} Padre John Foster-Haigh had been a professional singer in civilian life, “known throughout England as John Foster, the B.B.C. Tenor” [McNeilly, “Changi Celebrity Artists,” 1]. Foster-Haigh had already founded a Male Voice Choir, which Gibby Inglefield joined.

costumed characters on stage performing their drama of passion and death to music from Bizet's *Carmen*.

One of the new faces in the cast was Nigel Wright, a member of the F.M.S.V.F. (Federated Malay States Volunteer Forces) who had worked as a chemist for the rubber planters in Malaya and had years of experience leading an amateur theatre there. But two star performers—comedian Jack McNaughton and female impersonator Arthur Butler—were absent from the cast. When *New Pins and Needles* closed, they had put together a show to tour other areas in Changi.

Camp Bulletin 20/6-16/8/42: Re Decapitation

On 20 July, rumors were confirmed about another overseas deployment—but not for a working party. With thousands of POWs in Changi and Singapore and relatively few I. J. A. or Indian National Army^{xl} troops to guard them, the Japanese feared the POWs might attempt a breakout. To prevent such a possibility, all the senior officers above the rank of lieutenant-colonel were ordered removed from Changi and sent overseas—presumably to Japan. Jack McNaughton and Arthur Butler were scheduled to leave with them as members of their support staff.

The actual evacuation of these senior officers did not take place until 16 August. Before departure, General Percival placed Lieutenant-Colonel E. B. Holmes in charge of the British troops and Lieutenant-Colonel “Black Jack” Galleghan in charge of the Australians.⁷⁹ A month after their arrival in Taiwan, McNaughton and Butler were transferred to Chosen [Korea], where, by Christmas, they appeared in a series of shows in Keijo [Seoul] POW camp.

With Butler's departure, Bobby Spong became the Mumming Bees' leading female impersonator. Lieutenant James Richardson, who had seen both Butler and Spong on stage, much preferred Spong's abilities to create the illusion of a glamorous female: “Bobby Spong as a girl—very good (luscious, seductive bitch who always looks like a forthright whore!).”⁸⁰

And the Shows Go On

If the I. J. A. believed removal of the senior officers would make a significant difference in the ongoing life in Changi, they were mistaken. The POWs were more concerned about the possibility of a diphtheria epidemic, as the illness had already caused two deaths and put nearly two hundred men in the hospital.⁸¹ When that fear proved unfounded, each area tried to encourage attendance at its shows by showcasing new performers, putting on different types of programming, and playing new venues.

In the 18th Division, the New Windmill Theatre's *Windmill Variety No. 1* featured two new groups, John Foster-Haigh's Male Voice Choir and the 18th Division Signals String Band, as well as Fergus Anckorn performing several of his conjuring tricks. In the Southern Area, Eric Cliffe organized a concert of classical music performed in the officers' mess. After the concert, Richardson, who loved this type of music, wistfully mused, “What a wonderful place the world would be.”⁸²

^{xl} These were Sikh soldiers who had been members of the 3rd Indian Corps. When they were first captured, the Japanese removed them to a separate area to recruit them for the I. N. A., whose goal was the liberation of India from colonial rule. Many of these Indian soldiers willingly—or under duress—renounced their allegiance to the British Crown and became members of the new army. Those that refused were eventually sent to Thailand and held in a secret section of the hospital camp at Nakhon Pathom (see Chapter 8: “Breakout”).



FIGURE 1.24. SOUVENIR PROGRAM FOR *FUN FARE: A NEW EDITION*. IWM 65/144/1.

While *Pass the Nuts* continued its run in the Pavilion Theatre during August, Britt went back to work on his revision of *Wonder Bar*. To serve the needs of Southern Area troops who had already seen *Pass the Nuts*, “Fizzer” Pearson produced “a new quick-fire revue,” *Fun Fare: A New Edition*, with a group of performers from *Nuts* that toured area units during the day.^{xli}

Camp Bulletin 2-5/9/42: Re the “Selarang Incident”

With the senior echelon of POW officers off the scene, I. J. A. headquarters issued a demand that every POW sign a form swearing that he would not under any circumstances attempt to escape.⁸³ This command was in direct contradiction to the treatment of POWs laid down in the Hague and Geneva conventions. After much debate, the POW administration refused to sign, and in retaliation, all the POWs in Changi, except those in Roberts Hospital, were ordered to assemble in Selarang Barracks square by 2 September or be shot.⁸⁴ So 15,000-plus POWs^{xlii} trundled to the parade ground of the Selarang Barracks with everything they could carry or load onto hand-drawn trailers, including their food. In Selarang Square they found no latrine facilities and only one water point. To further intimidate the POWs, machine gun emplacements were set up at the corners of the square and Japanese and Sikh guards with fixed bayonets patrolled the perimeter. That night thousands of POWs slept out in the open.

The standoff was finally resolved two days later when the POW negotiating team proposed that the prisoners would sign the form if it was acknowledged they had done so “under duress.” The I. J. A. agreed to this provision, and the deadlock was broken.^{xliii} By 6:30 p.m., all the POWs had signed the “no-escape” forms. Denis Russell-Roberts, for one, thought, “What a lot of ballyhoo it all was.”

^{xli} Another program gives credit for producing the show to Leofric Thorpe.

^{xlii} Not everyone agrees on the exact numbers.

^{xliii} See Ronald Havers’ *Reassessing Changi* for a blow-by-blow description of these negotiations.

Nevertheless it gave us an excuse to celebrate, and that night[,] the eve of release, we put on a grand camp concert. A stage was somehow made out of two or three trailers parked together; lights, curtains and props were organised, and when the curtain went up, there must have been nearly fifteen thousand pairs of eyes riveted on that stage. All the stars of the Southern Area Concert Party were in their best form, ably supported by Bill Middleton and his orchestra.^{xliv} And when Bobby Spong came on magnificently dressed as a woman, the roar that went up from that square must have been heard all over the island.⁸⁵

The transgressive nature of Spong's appearance in all "her" finery was instantly recognized by the POWs as a defiant "Up Yours!" to the Japanese—and as an affirmation of their ability to prevail. If they had lost the battles for Malaya and Singapore through the incompetence of their leadership, they had at least won this round. Further acts of transgression ensued.

When the concert had ended we stood to attention and sang *God Save the King*. The few lights on the square had gone out and we stood in the darkness facing the Japanese on the Guard Room balcony. We sang as we had never sung before, with the orchestra seeming to encourage us to even louder and greater efforts. This was a truly wonderful act of defiance, directed upwards at those figures on the balcony from the throats of fifteen thousand men.⁸⁶

Keenly aware of their spectators' gaze, the performers and audience members saw the activity they were engaged in from a totally new perspective: concert parties were not simply entertainment but acts of resistance—an important lesson for those headed Up Country, where the enemy would attend the shows and sit in the front row, always in sight of the POWs behind them.

The next day the POWs returned to their separate areas of Changi and continued on as before, buoyed by their newfound solidarity.⁸⁷

Something Old, Something New

Once the men were back in their respective areas, entertainment seemingly picked up where it had left off. On Saturday, 10 September, Australian medical officer Charles Huxtable, as he had many times before, accompanied two patients from Roberts Hospital to see the variety show in the New Windmill Theatre (the same show that had been running prior to "the Selarang Incident"). There Huxtable took special note of Fergus Anckorn and his performance: "A tall, fair young man dressed in full evening dress with white tie and tails (where did he get his clothes?) was very clever with a pack of cards and he entertained and mystified the audience with various tricks."⁸⁸

^{xliv} A show hastily produced by Leo Britt with the A.I.F. concert party's orchestra.



FIGURE 1.25. FERGUS ANCKORN AS "WIZARDUS." COURTESY OF FERGUS ANCKORN.

Emboldened by his earlier success, Eric Cliffe convinced Norman Smith that the Southern Area should offer a series of classical concerts during the rest of the month, modeled on the popular "Proms" at the Royal Albert Hall in London. All members of the British Empire knew about these iconic promenade concerts because the annual festival of music was broadcast each year on the BBC. The concerts would also give Leo Britt time to rehearse his production of *Wonder Bar*.

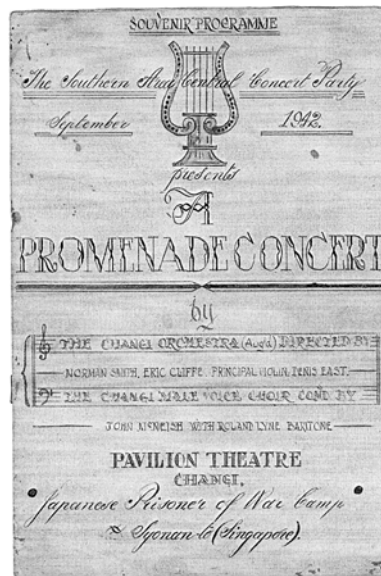


FIGURE 1.26. PROGRAM OF MUSIC FOR *PROMENADE CONCERT*. IWM 65/144/1.

For these concerts, the Southern Area's orchestra was augmented ("Aug'd") by musicians such as Denis East from other areas.

Camp Bulletin 18/9/42: Re New Arrivals

On 18 September, life in Changi was disrupted by the arrival of the first substantial party of POWs from camps in the Netherlands East Indies. These "Ex-Java Parties" (as they came to be known) contained Australian, British, Netherlands East Indies (hereafter N.E.I.), and American soldiers, as well as airmen and sailors.^{xlv} The new arrivals were dispersed and billeted in different divisions. At the same time, working parties stationed in and around Singapore began to be transferred back into their units in Changi, causing an acute housing shortage. The situation was exacerbated further at the end of the month when POWs who had been held in Malaya, including musicians "Ace" Connolly and Bob Gale, began to arrive. Changi was being transformed into an enormous transit camp in readiness for massive troop evacuations.

As several of the N.E.I. men were performers who had been entertaining their campmates on Java, their arrival proved a boon to Changi concert parties and their audiences by offering new faces and new acts. On 10 October, an A.I.F. concert party variety show concluded—much to the delight of the audience—with a trio of N.E.I. troops from Java performing a medley of Hawaiian songs enhanced by the presence of a hula dancer.



FIGURE 1.27. HULA DANCER. CHARLES BURKI. IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

This trio and hula dancer would become extremely popular in POW camps Up Country.

"The Great Migration"

In early October the long-anticipated massive troop evacuations got under way. Between 9 and

^{xlv} The American soldiers were from the 2nd Battalion of the 131st Field Artillery Brigade (Texas National Guard); the sailors had been rescued from the U.S.S. Houston and the H.M.A.S. Perth, both of which had been sunk in the Sunda Straits off Java early on in the Japanese advance south.

16 October, the Australians at River Valley Road, along with the Dutch/Indonesian and American ex-Java POWs in Selarang, were ordered to Burma as “Williams Force” to join “A Force” already there. British POWs, including Len Gibson and his mates and Jack Chalker, were sent to Thailand instead. Four parties of British soldiers from Sime Road Camp led by Lieutenant-Colonel Philip Toosey followed soon after. As they departed, ten additional parties arrived from Java. David Nelson labeled these troops movements “the Great Migration.”⁸⁹ Major construction on the Thailand-Burma railway was about to begin.

At first the impact of these work site and ex-Java evacuations on the POWs remaining in Changi was minimal. Their attention was focused instead on another diphtheria outbreak that had temporarily closed the New Windmill Theatre. But in the third week of October, when word came from Malaya Command that 8,650 more POWs would be needed in Thailand—and supplied only from troops in the British divisions in Changi—morale among those remaining began to plummet.

Troops in the Southern Area were among the first targeted for transport Up Country. The initial draft of 200 left by rail on 24 October, followed daily by drafts of 650, eventually including members of the Mummie Bees. Providing “farewell concerts” for these departing troops became top priority. “It was decided,” Norman Smith wrote, “to keep concerts going as long as there were people to entertain and those of us running the theatre were on the last group to leave. This turned out to be advantageous in that the group tended to remain together. Later on this made it easier to repeat the setting up of theatres in the destination camps.”⁹⁰

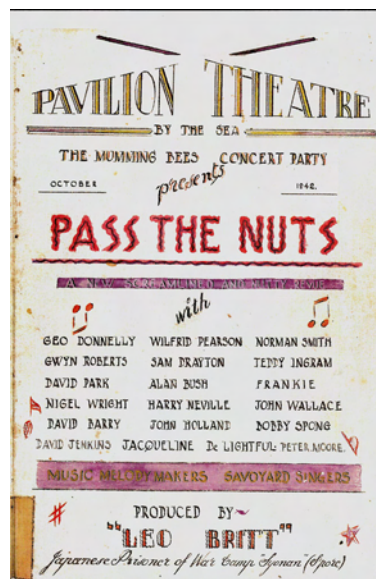


FIGURE 1.28. SOUVENIR PROGRAM FOR *PASS THE NUTS*. IWM 65/144/1.

Given these exigencies, Leo Britt's production of *Wonder Bar* was abandoned, and a remount of *Pass the Nuts* was produced instead. One new performer in the cast was Ted Ingram (see **Figures 1.29–31** in the Image Gallery for the playbill listing other cast members). Since electricity had just been restored to the Southern Area, the remount would at least have the added attraction of stage lighting.

In the audience on 23 October was Lieutenant G. Stanley Gimson, whose diary entry captures both the nervous, unsettled atmosphere among the troops about to leave Changi as well as the magic of that

evening's spectacular "Blood and Sand" finale:

Tonight with all the mental upset of impending move . . . , to a concert. There was all the usual stuff—funny, sentimental & naughty—most of it excellent. For the first time we had lighting, and so as the sun set, the concert moved on toward the final scene. The setting was Spain; outside a bullring. The back cloth white with leafy branches across it. The stage was crowded—costumes in black, white and & scarlet, as colourful as one might wish. The soft lighting only half-lights the stage and overcame its smallness with deep shadows. A dancer—surely a girl—with tambourine, weaved in and out. The toreador sat drinking. The Dona Isabella sat sipping her wine, the aged priest beside her. The music from Carmen. It was wistfully, unbelievably beautiful.—When it was all over, and a few sad speeches made, the National Anthem—fervently sung. . . . Outside the moon was brilliant, shining over the valley between the palm trees.⁹¹

Although many troops from the 11th and 18th Divisions were also included in these drafts, members of the P.O.W. WOWS, the Changi Celebrity Artists, and the New Windmill Players were spared. Padre Foster-Haigh's choir was not so lucky. By 26 October he had lost half of the forty members who had started rehearsing excerpts from Handel's "The Messiah" for their first Christmas in captivity.⁹² With so many men leaving, classes in the Changi Universities dwindled and eventually came to an end.

Farewell shows in other areas of Changi were taking place as well. On 1 November in the 18th Division, there was a farewell concert for ex-Java POWs leaving from the Divisional Signals' sector: "It was a show one won't easily forget," wrote Captain Charles Wilkinson, "as the turns were all provided by British, Australian, American and Dutch troops and by U.S. Navy, all of whom are P.O.Ws here and have been brought in from various islands such as Java, Batavia, and some of them even out of the sea!"⁹³

When the New Windmill Theatre reopened on 2 November, performances of the revue *Gentlemen Only* were given twice nightly for departing troops.⁹⁴ The hit of the show was a Dutch/Indonesian illusionist who went by the stage name "the Great Cortini." Viewers were thrilled, Fergus Anckorn recalled, when he "visibly turned into a perfect skeleton in front of the audiences' eyes. And then back to normal. NO MIRRORS!"⁹⁵

The next day British division commanders received an urgent message from Malaya Command requesting an additional party of nearly 2,000 men, with the last group scheduled to leave on 9 November. This time, members of the P.O.W. WOWS, as well as newly arrived "Ace" Connolly and his musicians, and actors Michael Curtis and W. S. Milsum of the New Windmill Players, were included in the drafts.

Fearing he might be called up as well, the classical pianist Reginald Renison was in despair. Fergus Anckorn "came across him sitting on the ground looking very despondent, and on my enquiring, he said he could not go on without his music which was his life. I told him to put up with things and we would soon be back home."⁹⁶ Renison lucked out: he was not included in the current drafts. Anckorn was not so lucky: he was.

By now, almost all the troops scheduled from the Southern Area had left. On 6 November, Leofric Thorpe, Norman Smith, Leo Britt, Bobby Spong, and other members of the Mummie Bees followed in the last draft.

Roll Call

These are the men who, with their music and theatre, would become instrumental in helping the POWs on the Thailand-Burma railway endure the unimaginable hardships of that construction project and the years of imprisonment that followed its completion. The entertainment they produced would be for many the difference between living with hope and sinking into despair. They would be joined by other entertainers sent directly to Burma from Java and Sumatra, and by new faces who step forward from among the ranks. Their experience producing concert parties on improvised stages with scrounged materials in Changi or on Java would serve them well for the more difficult circumstances encountered Up Country.

But this is not the end of the story. In January 1943 another large contingent of POWs arrived in Changi from Java—called, this time, the “Java rabble.” Among them were Australian medical officer Lieutenant-Colonel Weary Dunlop and the Dutch/Indonesian cabaret entertainers Joop Postma, Philip Brugman, Ferry van Delden, and accordionist Han Samethini.



FIGURE 1.32. HAN SAMETHINI, PREWAR PHOTOGRAPH.
COURTESY OF ROBIN KALHORN.

The “Java rabble” were quickly sent on to Thailand.

In the spring, when starvation, illness, and death decimated the Up Country workforce, raising serious doubt as to whether the railway could be completed on time, urgent calls for more POWs from Changi would follow.

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- 4 Nelson, 14.
- 5 Inglefield, 20.
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- 7 Inglefield, 24.
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The Thailand-Burma Railway: An Overview

The Imperial Japanese Army's decision to build a 259-mile railway line that would connect Bangkok, Thailand, with Moulmein, Burma, was based on two realities. The first was their need to find an alternative supply route for their forces in Burma. By the spring of 1942, the shipping lane through the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal had become increasingly vulnerable to Allied attacks. A railway would need to be built through dense malarial jungles, across raging rivers, and over the treacherous mountain chain that separated Burma and Thailand. The British had explored this idea earlier in the century and then abandoned it because of the difficulties—difficulties exacerbated by annual monsoon rains.



FIGURE OVERVIEW.1. MAP OF THE THAILAND-BURMA RAILWAY.

The second reality was that thousands of Allied POWs incarcerated in prison camps in Southeast Asia provided an enormous potential labor force for such a venture. Although the Hague and Geneva Conventions forbade the use of prisoners of war in work that supported the captors' war effort, the Japanese were not deterred. They had not signed those protocols.

Between May 1942 and May 1943, slightly over 61,000 Allied POWs from Singapore, Sumatra, and the Netherlands East Indies (present-day Indonesia) were sent Up Countryⁱ in a series of drafts to construct the railway. These drafts—variously designated as “Forces,” “Groups,” or “Parties”—were reorganized by the Japanese into “Groups” or “Branches”ⁱⁱ under Southern Army Command's POW Accommodation headquarters in Burma and Thailand. Attempts were made by various POW commands in Singapore to ensure that musicians and/or other concert party personnel were included in the drafts so they could keep morale high and affirm group solidarity with their performances. It became standard policy to keep these entertainers together as much as possible during their time Up Country. In spite of these efforts many POWs would never experience anything more than an impromptu sing-along—if that—during the construction period.

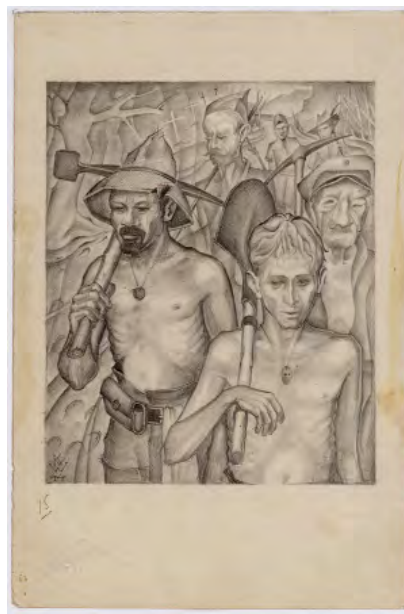


FIGURE OVERVIEW. 2. “FORCED LABORERS.” KEES VAN WILLIGEN. IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

The POWs were joined by an estimated 300,000 *romusha* (indigenous contract laborers) from Burma, Malaya, Java, and other conquered nations whom the Japanese coerced into working on the railway. Many of them arrived with their families and were placed together with other *romusha* in separate work camps. Without any internal organization for support, in contrast to the POWs with their military structure, they suffered greatly. Their tragic story has only recently been the subject of serious investigation.¹

ⁱ The term Up Country in uppercase letters was used by the POWs to refer to either Burma or Thailand; up country in lowercase letters was used for locations further up the individual railway line.

ⁱⁱ The Japanese designation; see Tamayama, 162.

Construction of the railway—from Thanbyuzayat in Burma and from Kanchanaburi in Thailand—commenced in October 1942.

During the construction period, the engineers of the Imperial Army's 5th Railway Regiment (Thailand) and 9th Railway Regiment (Burma) had authority over POW accommodation group and local camp commandants. Since the I. J. A. needed their top military officers and able-bodied soldiers elsewhere in the war effort, officers placed in charge of POW accommodations were either older, not the most competent administrators, or, in the case of individual camps, lower in rank, such as lieutenants or noncommissioned officers. The guards—mainly Korean conscripts—were considered inferior by the Japanese and treated as such. Each camp also had a POW commandant who had several adjutants representing various constituencies. In camps where POWs of different nationalities were billeted together, each group had its own section of the camp where it could maintain a separate identity and authority.

For the most part, the Japanese honored the Geneva Convention that said officers who are prisoners of war should not be required to engage in manual labor. Since the POWs on the railway were not segregated into officers' and other ranks' camps, officers were responsible for the administration and welfare of the men, but always within boundaries set by the Japanese administration.

In the spring of 1943, Imperial General Command in Tokyo, anxious to get supplies, equipment, and troops into Burma to launch the "liberation of India" campaign before the British could regroup their forces, decided to move up the deadline for completion of the railway by several months—to October 1943, which they hoped would coincide with the end of the rainy season. This acceleration became known as "the Speedo." It was during this period that the Thailand-Burma railway earned its epithet as the "death" railway.

A Note on Camp Designations. The spelling of camp names along the Thailand-Burma railway varies widely in the literature, as the POWs transcribed what they heard into diaries and reports. A camp like Kanyu, for instance, also appears as Konyu or Kanu. Recently, researchers have attempted to standardize the spellings and correlate them to Thai or Burmese place names.² "Kanyu" has now been designated "Kannyu," for example. Because these new transliterations are rarely found in the POW dairies or memoirs—major sources of information for this study—I have selected the name or spelling that appears most often in the original sources or that will cause the least confusion.

Chapter 2: “Jungle Shows” Thailand

Those jungle shows striving to create laughter amid exhaustion and cruelty.

Jimmy Walker, *Of Rice and Men*

1942

Up Country

The first POWs from Changi POW Camp, Singapore, were sent Up Country to Thailand during the monsoon season in mid-June 1942 as “Mainland No. 1 Work Party”—an advance group whose job was to assist the I. J. A. engineers in surveying the route of the projected railway and to build the supply depot at Nong Pladuk/000 Kilo, the transit camp at Ban Pong/003 Kilo, and the first leg of the railway to the Kanchanaburi area. It wasn’t until October, when the monsoon season was drawing to a close, that thousands of POWs followed, crammed into steel boxcars like so much chattel for the train trip north.



FIGURE 2.1. “SINGAPORE—BANGKOK.” JACK CHALKER. COURTESY OF JACK CHALKER.

“The next stage of our journey, to be repeated every day,” Laurie Allisonⁱ remembered, “was sheer hell with shortage of water, shortage of food, jammed stinking bodies and short tempers. Many became sick and the car stank of vomit and excreta.”³ This suffering was just the beginning of the long ordeal ahead. When the POWs arrived at Ban Pong after their torturous five-day ride from Singapore, the men in Jimmy Walker’s contingent asked him to provide a little entertainment to take their minds off the nasty trip and their uncertain future. In the months that followed, this became a recurring request.

In response, Walker and his buddy Hank Phillips found a platform that could function as a stage, made a backcloth, and proceeded to perform some of their old jokes and comic sketches.ⁱⁱ When orders came to move up country, the POWs were split up and transported by truck or marched up the line to their initial work sites beyond the provincial city of Kanchanaburi in western Thailand. Assigned different work

ⁱ Allison, an Australian who had enlisted in the British Army prior to the war, was a member of Singapore Fortress Signals.

ⁱⁱ Walker had been a producer of “The Harbour Lights” shows back in Keppel Harbour, Singapore.

groups, Walker and Phillips lost touch with each other until a chance meeting at Nong Pladuk in the spring of 1943.

The city of Kanchanaburi was situated at the confluence of the Mae Khlong and Kwai Noi rivers. Just outside the city were three POW camps: Kanburi/050 Kilo, a hospital camp;ⁱⁱⁱ Kanburi/051, an airfield and maintenance camp; and Kanburi/053, headquarters for the engineers of the 9th Railway Regiment. Almost four miles north of Kanchanaburi was Tamarkan/056 Kilo camp. In the jungle across the Mae Khlong from Kanchanaburi was Chungkai/060 Kilo, bounded on its south side by the Kwai Noi. Since the length of the railway construction in Thailand would be twice that in Burma, base camps for each of the major POW work force groups were established at Kanburi, Tamarkan, and Chungkai. As there was little, if any, organized entertainment in the base camps until late 1943/early 1944, these locations will be examined in later chapters.

Initial Construction: October '42-March '43

The railway constructed beyond Chungkai would, for the most part, parallel the Kwai Noi so that it, along with a dirt access road, could be used as a conduit for the transportation of men and materiel up country. Looking back on his experience, Walker outlined the sequence and types of work the railway construction entailed:

A long line of labour stretched through the jungle. At the spearhead was the Jap survey team with their labourers, then came the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders cutting, burning and heaving trees off the destined track.

Most badly treated of all were the bridge-building gangs, who with huge trees and dog-spikes, erected roadways over the chasms. Then came the pick and shovel men building embankments and hacking out cuttings. Later came the Rail Gangs, humping and laying the heavy teak sleepers to bear the clanging rails and in their entourage, the fish-plate fixers and they who hammered home the spikes that held the rails to the sleepers.⁴

Impromptu Beginnings

Early accounts of entertainment on the Thailand end of the railway appear in two work camps located in hilly jungle terrain: Wampo Central/113 Kilo and Kanyu River/150 Kilo.

ⁱⁱⁱ *The existence of this camp before 1943 is in some doubt.*



FIGURE 2.2. THAILAND RAILWAY MAP #1: BAN PONG—MALAYAN HAMLET.

The POWs at Wampo Central were charged with constructing a huge wooden viaduct which, in conjunction with the subsequent chiseling of the cliff face above, would eventually allow the railway to pass through high above the Kwai Noi.^{iv} When the last of the monsoon rains prevented the men from gathering outside after their evening meal, the POWs found ways to entertain themselves in the huts. Ian Peek, a member of the Singapore Straits Volunteer Forces, participated in these impromptu entertainments: “We lie on the bamboo slats in our dark huts and take turns in providing some sort of entertainment. No compulsion, but boredom is a great destroyer of morale, so we all try to think of something to contribute which might be of interest or make others laugh.”⁵

By late November, the monsoon season had passed and J. T. Rea recorded POWs engaged in impromptu sing-alongs around bonfires on the one *yasume* day they got out of ten.⁶ Len Gibson was one of the men responsible for these musical gatherings:

Some men managed to acquire some fat or oil and with a piece of string to serve as a wick made a crude lamp using an empty can. By this poor light men would play cards; often with home-made ones. Others would light fires and sit out in the open. I often took out my guitar and played at the camp fires and if Charley Carney and Michael Conlin joined in it would develop into a concert.⁷

Because of the challenges in constructing the huge wooden viaduct and cutting the cliff wall, the POWs remained in their Wampo camps for six months. This stability of location and personnel offered the opportunity of moving beyond impromptu entertainment to something more substantial.

Kanyu River Camp, situated on the banks of the Kwai Noi at the base of one of the hills, became the way station through which men and supplies moved to the construction camps above. In those camps, men were charged with constructing trestle bridges across ravines and carving out routes for the railway

^{iv} Wampo Central/113 Kilo, Wampo South, and Wampo North—the latter two a little less than two miles in either direction from the central camp.

^v The Japanese command for “At ease!” came to mean “rest day” as well.

along the faces of steep hills—the latter job in preparation for digging the Kanyu Cutting.^{vi} By November, the POWs, weakened by inadequate diet and hard physical work, began to fall ill with dysentery, malaria, and beriberi. Scratches quickly became infected with flesh-eating ulcers. Men started to die. Jack Chalker remembered that one of his first duties on arrival in Kanyu River Camp was to set up a cemetery.⁸

It was late November before an impromptu concert party took place:

a large party of officers were brought up-country and established a camp a few Km down-river from us [wrote Chalker].^{vii} Amongst these was a Captain “Fizzer” Pearson who came to our Kanyu Camp to pull together a small group of us to produce some sort of entertainment as a relief on Yasumi [*sic*] days, providing we were capable of anything beyond the daily exhausting misery of the working camps.⁹

Pearson had been instrumental in organizing “The Mumming Bees” concert party back in Changi, Singapore. Also in the officers party was orchestra conductor Norman Smith, who tried to engage the POWs in music to keep their morale high. “So much work was done whilst at Kanyu that little opportunity existed for setting up some sort of entertainment,” Smith wrote. “There was only a piano accordion but we decided that in the evenings after lighting the bonfires, community singing might prove popular. I asked for volunteers to form a choir and had a good response.”¹⁰ The accordion player, Fred Coles, was among the handful of other ranks musicians and entertainers brought up country as batmen and cooks for the officers.



FIGURE 2.3. CAMPFIRE CONCERT KANU. JOHN MENNIE. IWM ART 167122.
COURTESY OF THE FAMILY OF JOHN G. MENNIE.

Because of their energy, enthusiasm, and dogged commitment to provide entertainment for the POWs wherever they went, Pearson and Smith would become legends on the Thailand-Burma railway.

^{vi} *Kanyu River Camp/150 Kilo, Kanyu/151 Kilo, Kanyu/152 Kilo.*

^{vii} *At Malayan Hamlet/153 Kilo.*

Entertaining Developments

In early November, Fergus Anckorn, the sleight-of-hand artist “Wizardus,” arrived in one of the other Wampo camps where he performed tricks to entertain the troops and their guards. Anckorn’s skills in diverting attention from what he didn’t want his audience to see also proved useful in helping the POWs steal needed supplies for themselves.

Back in Wampo Central, impromptu sing-alongs had become popular, so Len Gibson, “together with some of the Gordon Highlanders led by Snuffy Craig . . . conceived the idea of giving a camp concert. One of our friends in the 125 Regiment was Billy Arnold and he had an uncle in show business. He’d evidently seen many of his uncle’s revues and under his direction we put on a show called, “A Mug in London.””¹¹ The success of this first show quickly developed into a demand for more.

Beneath this enthusiasm was an undercurrent of apprehension. With increasing incidents of POWs succumbing to illness, ominous thoughts about the future began to creep into the men’s consciousness. “It is depressing to study some people,” J. T. Rea noted. “You are accustomed to seeing them well, active and cheerful. Then they get dysentery and disappear for a while. Then they reappear thin, haggard, and dragging themselves about with a worried expression on their faces. It makes one rather fear what the future may hold.”¹²

The POWs’ worsening health and growing apprehension were on the minds of their officers as well. Officer in charge Lieutenant-Colonel Harold Lilly knew that one way to counter the effects of psychological stress on their deteriorating physical conditions was entertainment. What they needed were regularly scheduled shows by a concert party producing more than impromptu sing-alongs. Confronting Commandant Lieutenant Tanaka about the dire situation, Lilly proposed a solution: that an official concert party diverting the prisoners’ attention from their ills would help them find the willpower to keep working. Tanaka concurred. As the news that a concert party had been approved spread, there was an immediate improvement in camp morale. Lilly issued an appeal for volunteer performers and stagehands to come forward.¹³

But an “official” concert party created a dilemma for Tanaka. How could he justify it to his superiors when everyone in the camp was supposed to be working: the officers on “light duty” inside the camp; the other ranks in “heavy duty” on the railway? According to Peek, Tanaka’s solution was to make the concert party an “unofficial (but Tanaka-approved) working party comprised of officers with professional experience (surprisingly many) and enthusiastic helpers.”¹⁴

The Wampo Concert Party

With the “carrot” of light camp duties, Gibson noted that other POWs quickly answered the call for more artists and helpers:

Frank Street, an excellent trumpeter, Reg Dixon an accordionist, and Charley Whiting who sang to his own accompaniment on the accordion were a great addition to the party.

I was approached by three Eurasian lads from the Singapore Volunteers who said they would sing if it was possible to borrow my guitar. So it was that I became friends with Jimmy Scheerder, Sidney de Cruz and Salo Suzarte. They

sang Hawaiian songs in harmony and became a very popular act.^{viii15}

And so out of improvisational beginnings, the Wampo Concert Party was born. It quickly grew in size to more than fifteen members.

We used to practice in a little clearing away from the camp. There were artists and helpers. One helper was Tony Lock (Oxbridge and Foreign Office) content to just come along to keep the fire burning.

Apart from myself there were Michael Conlin, Charley Carney, Johnny Glancy, Jack Baldridge and Billy Arnold who were Sunderland lads and Snuffy Craig's group of Gordons plus four from the Sherwoods^{ix} and the Singapore trio.¹⁶

Concert party performances would take place once a month. "These concerts always conclude with 'There'll Always Be An England' and 'God Save The King,'" J. K. Gale noted. "So far the Nips have raised no objections."¹⁷ Their entertainment puzzled the Japanese: "The Nip Officers have frequently remarked that they cannot understand how we keep so cheerful as captives and why we laugh so much. They think that we must be very unpatriotic."¹⁸

With the formation of a concert party, the entertainers at Wampo began to dream bigger dreams. Performing "round the fires" had its drawbacks in terms of allowing everyone to see and hear clearly. To remedy this problem they requested—and received—permission to construct a stage, which they proceeded to build just off the parade ground. "A raised platform is shovelled up to form a stage and bamboo matting taken from the cookhouses to make a backdrop and side screens," observed a fascinated Peek. "The matting is daubed with white ash and soot to depict an Italian-style villa with a terrace, a low stone balustrade with urns and statues, and poplar trees dwindling in perspective into the background."¹⁹

Since the new theatre with its décor looked like one of the outdoor Mediterranean nightclubs seen in 1930s Hollywood musicals, it was named, appropriately, "Casino de Wampo." With the audience seated on the level ground facing in the same direction before a raised platform with a backing, the problems of visibility and audibility were solved—and the possibilities for scenery and lighting effects enhanced. Potential set designers and stage technicians were now encouraged to step forward.

First Performance

The opening performance on the new Wampo stage took place at 9 p.m. on 30 November as part of a St. Andrew's Day celebration. The stage was lit by two huge bonfires, one at each corner, and by resin torches.²⁰ From a standing room-only area, Peek observed the opening night scene: "The colonel and the Jap commandant seat themselves centre-front on a bamboo bench, a few Nips flanking their officer, and our own officers alongside the colonel and filling the second row."²¹

Back in Changi, the Japanese had never attended a POW performance. When they did so for

viii From Gale's point of view, the musicians who carried "two piano accordions, two trumpets and a guitar" all the way Up Country from Singapore to Wampo were "either great fools or very public spirited."

ix British army units: Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders, Gordon Highlanders, and Sherwood Foresters.

the first time Up Country, their attendance must have produced quite a shock—and resentment. But permission for the POWs to form concert parties and build theatres was given with an understanding that the Japanese administration would be permitted to attend the shows as well.^x And when they came, they, of course, wanted the best seats: “centre-front.”

Before the show started, another unexpected audience arrived. Seven men who had lost their ability to cope were brought to the concert “in the hope that music and singing, laughter and chatter, will stir memories and provide a linkage by which they might pull themselves out of the mental vacuum.”²² While they were being seated there was total silence.

The traditional St. Andrew’s Day meal—the haggis—was then piped in, “seemingly, from the depth of the jungle,” observed John Godber. “The ‘Haggis,’ of course, was rice but it was nevertheless accorded all the appropriate ceremonial. It was passed round and most people had a spoonful including the Jap commandant.”²³ Following this ceremony the variety show began. Peek was so impressed with the assortment of entertainers that had been found in the camp and the quality of the performance that he made extensive notes on it in his diary. The first item on the bill was an Australian corporal singing Neapolitan folk songs. He turned the stage over to the Singapore Volunteers with their odd assortment of camp-made instruments.

Tonight, stimulated by a shouting, whistling, laughing crowd of 1600 men letting off steam, they plonk and plunk, toot and bong their way through their program, then take off spontaneously with songs and funny stories until they are exhausted. For sheer morale and high spirits they have the admiration of all of us.²⁴

Next came readings from Shakespeare and the Victorian poets, followed by “haunting melodies from Ivor Novello, sketches and farces from the London stage, all delivered with such skill and flair that even the most low-brow amongst us enjoys them. And, of course, jokes—clean, coarse, bawdy, subtle and crude, unprintable but not unsayable, and all stations in between.”²⁵

It was after midnight when the Japanese commandant stood up, effectively ending the concert. “A bottle of spirits, a tin of fish and cigarettes” were presented by Lieutenant Tanaka to the “three best turns” chosen by audience applause.²⁶ Afterward, everyone, including “the Japs all stood for God Save the King & some even joined in!”²⁷

Once the Japanese departed, Colonel Lilly went up on stage and thanked everyone for their efforts. He asked the audience to stay in their places until the seven sick men were escorted back to their quarters. Nothing had shaken them out of their “mental vacuum.” “It’s a chilling thought that any one of us can end up just like that,” Peek wrote. The rest of the audience then went back to their huts, humming the music and recounting the jokes. That night the POWs slept well.²⁸ The “unofficial (but Tanaka approved)” Wampo Concert Party was established.

Enter Charles Woodhams

The next day, John Godber voiced concern about the concert party’s future: “of course we have so

^x This very quickly became the standard practice Up Country, so when Peek came to write his memoir, it didn’t strike him as unusual.

many times had the same items from the same people that it's getting pretty boring." He then confessed, "Actually I don't often go to these concerts now."²⁹ If Godber's reaction was typical, then new material and new blood needed to be found immediately or the concert party was in danger of losing its audience. The entertainers at Wampo were fortunate. Working side by side on "light duty" tasks in the camp during the day would give them time to develop material. New blood appeared unexpectedly.

Following the concert, Charles Woodhams, who had dance training and professional experience, volunteered his services and was immediately given the role of producer-director.^{xi} At his first meeting with the company, Woodhams startled the others when he announced that there would be "women" in the next show. "He argued," recalled Gibson, "that we were limited by having plays with only men but with women the 'Sky would be the limit'":

First he wanted a leading lady. No one said a word and we thought that was the end of that until Bill James volunteered. We rolled around laughing. Bill was an Australian tin miner. Not only was he built like an ox but he had a huge moustache. And his voice—he could out roar a bull!

He actually was serious and shaved off his moustache and became a huge success in the part. Mind you, no one dare laugh at him.³⁰

Bill James would perform under the stage name "Barbette."

But Woodhams had said "women"—plural—so just one female impersonator wouldn't do, as Gibson soon discovered:

One practice night Jack Baldridge and I were chatting to Pat Donovan when Charles asked the three of us to stand together. We were of similar height and weight. "Now I only want three more like you," he said. Next meeting he arrived with the three and said that he was ready to start work. Only then did we realize that we were to be a chorus line.³¹

Woodhams wasn't interested in re-creating the usual farcical "Beauty Ballet" with hairy and ungainly men in tutus performing mock arabesques and stumbling leaps—a staple of military concert parties. His "beauty chorus" would learn how to dance.

Only then did we realize what hard work it was. We thought we were using all our muscles working for the Japs on the railway, but Charley Woodhams found muscles the Japs did not know about. Only Pat Donovan did not complain, but he was a professional boxer in civvy street. We practiced to [Dixon's] accordion playing, "I want to be happy." I was definitely not happy about doing it.³²

^{xi} *It was rumored that Woodhams had been a ballet master in civilian life (Gale, Diary, 25 February 1943).*

These dance rehearsals were only the beginning of Woodhams' attempts to transform these men into alluring female impersonators and not drag parodies. With Reginald Dixon as his musical director, Woodhams would produce a remarkable series of "jungle shows" up country.

A "Beauty Chorus" Debut

When the concert party performed again, Peek was in the audience to witness Woodhams' first show as producer: "The concert is simply marvelous," he wrote, "the stage is lit by big bonfires in front at each side, throwing a rosy flickering illumination which lets us see what is going on but, fortuitously, is not bright enough to show the makeshift scenery and costumes." In his further comments, Peek identified the three sources from which all the entertainers in Thailand and Burma would create their shows: "Some turns are from memory, others have been pieced together from a pool of recollections, and some are original."³³

In a POW camp rife with "borehole" rumors, the presence of a "beauty chorus" seems to have been kept a closely guarded secret. "When all was ready," Gibson remembered, "Reg Dixon struck up the introduction on his squeeze box, and the six of us emerged in line and keeping perfect time. This was a complete surprise for the whole camp and a roar went up which resounded throughout the jungle."³⁴ "The 'girls' are glamorous," wrote an astonished Peek, "in wigs of teased rope and a little Mercurochrome lipstick, with rice-flour cheeks and sooty eyebrows, their rice-bag dresses trimmed with leaves." They became the main attraction in a sketch re-creating dance night in an officers' mess:

The faithful accordion plays dance music, and couples drift around the stage in waltz and foxtrot time. Waiters hover, the crooner drools on about moonlight and perfumed nights and intimate whispers. It is all overwhelmingly nostalgic, the audience so lost in soft recollections of the past that the playlet ends in total silence while the men emerge from their private dreamlands. Then the applause is deafening.³⁵

Charles Woodhams' first production was a smash hit.

The shout that went up when the chorus line first appeared was heard by sick POWs in a field hospital half a mile away and also by the Japanese there. When their commandant, Lieutenant Hatori, learned what the hullabaloo was all about, he wanted to see the performance, so it was repeated a few nights later. In the meantime, Hatori had phoned up his colleagues in nearby camps to come over and see the show, which they did, arriving by barge. As the cast took their final bows, they proceeded to sing the national anthem, but this time "Hatori stood up and shouted, 'No King!'" For a few moments the cast was struck dumb, until Gibson whispered that they should sing "There'll Always Be an England." The Japanese did not object to this choice, but the Gordon Highlanders did—afterward. Henceforth it was decided to close shows with "Land of Hope and Glory," which seemed to offend no one.³⁶

Their concert parties were proving to be "a fine diversion," Gibson thought, "song contrasting to the daily grind on the railway track: for a few hours men could forget. . . . Of course it was back to work the next morning. It was back to reality. Back to the heat and the toil and the Jap guards and the yelling and bullying."³⁷

Japanese Entertainment

Not to be outdone by their captives, on 8 December the Japanese troops at Wampo gave a concert of their own. POWs were invited to attend if they wished. Godber did but kept his distance, as most of the Japanese were roaring drunk.

They sang a lot of very tuneless songs with great gusto, several of them gave little acts of their own such as dancing & general buffoonery. They also sang Auld Lang Syne for which they have their own words and “She’ll be coming round the mountain when she comes”—a Jap version of the English words. There seemed to be 6 M’s C. and several band masters. The band was 1 accordion & 1 cornet. The cornet player was a prisoner who plays it extremely well. He plays any of their tunes too if they have the music. It was quite amusing for a short time but after that just noisy.³⁸

The traditional ditty “She’ll Be Coming Round the Mountain” had become a Japanese favorite after it was introduced in schools run by American missionaries and educators in the late nineteenth century.

Christmas in Captivity

With December came the realization that Christmas holidays were fast approaching. The POWs’ first Christmas in captivity would be a difficult time emotionally. Carols and sketches, laden with images of home and better times, might cause the men to fall into depression and give up hope of release. To prevent this from happening, the content and tone of the Christmas festivities had to be just right.

Kanyu River: “A Handful of Cockney Jokers”

At Kanyu River Camp, preparations for special entertainment had been under way since the early part of the month. On Christmas Eve, Norman Smith’s newly formed choir gave a carol recital around a campfire. The next day, “Fizzer” Pearson presented his show at the base of a steep hill that formed a natural amphitheatre. “I was one of a large group of sick men,” wrote Jack Chalker, now afflicted with malaria, “who had gathered or were carried out and laid on the ground about the huge fire, under a clear brilliant, tropical night sky. With Fizzer were a handful of cockney jokers who gave an ad-lib performance and ending with some carols.” There was also a “radio programme” with the performers reading “their script from behind an attap screen.”³⁹

The “cockney jokers” were also among the cooks and batmen Pearson and Smith had brought up country.^{xii} The re-creation of a radio show would take the audience’s imaginations back to family gatherings in the living room on Christmas Day, listening to special holiday broadcasts on the radio console.^{xiii} As sparks from the huge bonfire flew upward, the evening’s performance ended with Smith’s choir, the cast, and audience singing “Silent Night.”⁴⁰

For Chalker, this first Christmas concert in captivity had provided the tonic the men so desperately

^{xii} The “cockney jokers” we know about were Eric Griffiths-Jones, John “Nellie” Wallace, and Sam Drayton.

^{xiii} This was the beginning of Pearson’s dramatics group, “The Radio Players,” about whom we will hear more later.

needed:

A most moving and poignant occasion as well as one of laughter; a strange scene of a mass of exhausted, sick, ragged, and in many cases dying men, enchanted and taken out of misery and given hope for a few hours by the efforts of a small handful of men who made us listen and laugh.^{xiv41}

Lieutenant Stanley Gimson found that “this has been a far cheerier Christmas than last. This year we expected little and received much—last year we hoped for much and got little. Last year too, the break with home was too recent and nostalgia prevailed—this year, I find memory is strong, but anticipation has supplanted nostalgia—and so to bed.”⁴² Not every POW was able to make the same emotional adjustment.

Wampo Central: Woodhams’ Christmas Cracker

Wampo Central also held special holiday celebrations. On Christmas Eve, “the Carol singers sang by torch-light as the moon had not risen,” Rea recorded in his diary. “They sang very well indeed and gave pleasure to all who cared to listen. Fire-side concerts went on until about 1:30 A.M.”⁴³

Seats for Woodhams’ production on Christmas Day were at a premium. Besides the benches at the front reserved for officers, there were only a few spots left in the limited seating area on the ground behind the officers that had not been “reserved” by squatters’ rights (i.e., placing an article of clothing on a chosen spot). Rea and his friends attended the evensong service that took place on the stage so they could secure those seats for the show that followed.⁴⁴

This time Woodhams’ surprise came at the top of the show for his unsuspecting audience. “We were staggered to see the first man to appear before the screen (made of blankets) was completely dressed in a double-breasted dinner jacket suit,” exclaimed Rea. “There was a stunned silence until everybody burst out laughing at the strangeness of it all. On his subsequent appearances this actor was minus the jacket as it had to be passed on to another of the players.”⁴⁵

Costumes are always a delight for an audience, even more so when no such possibility is expected. “Charles Woodhams was excellent with a needle,” Gibson explained.⁴⁶ His ability to produce costumes out of scrounged materials such as the burlap sacks from vegetable rations, rice sacks, or “the torn borders from worn out mosquito nets” would prove to be quite extraordinary.⁴⁷

As the POWs were told by the Japanese engineers how many meters of earth they had to produce for the railway embankment daily, Rea thought one of the funniest turns in the show was Eric Brancroft giving “an account of Sam Small at Wampoh trying to understand what the Japanese meant by a metre of earth.”^{xv} But the two highlights were the appearance of the Union Jack being raised at the back of the stage to a cheering audience and Colonel Lilly’s slightly inebriated speech to conclude the evening (he had been given some Siamese whisky by the Japanese commandant as a Christmas present).⁴⁸

With the national anthem forbidden, hoisting the Union Jack was a clever nonverbal substitute. It is surprising that the POWs got away with this provocative and subversive gesture. Lieutenant Hatori was

^{xiv} “Those who were there and survived this will, I am sure,” Chalker added, “treasure that occasion and it will not be forgotten.”

^{xv} “Old Sam” or “Sam Small and his musket on the evening before Waterloo” was one of British comedian Stanley Holloway’s famous character monologues about a stubborn soldier who willfully refuses to understand the order to pick up his musket because it had been inappropriately knocked out of his hands by the belligerent sergeant. One can easily imagine the topical version that Brancroft might have performed with this piece.

in the audience for the second performance and did not object.⁴⁹

Entertainment Elsewhere

Up to this point the account of entertainments on the Thai side of the railway has shuttled between two major construction camps. But there were other work camps where performers tried to provide something in the way of special entertainment for the holidays, even if only a sing-along 'round a campfire. Two of these were at opposite ends of the current railway construction: at Wang Lan/069 Kilo and at Kinsaiyok/171 Kilo.

At Wang Lan, Jimmy Walker and others had made a rudimentary stage on which to perform. "The 'stage' at Wun Lun [sic] was made by digging a trench, filling it with dead bamboo and the removed earth flattened to make a platform. The 'stage lighting' was tended not by an electrician but a stoker who set fire to the bamboo and kept it blazing. The performers acted or sang and were slowly cooked!"^{xvi50}

At the other end of the line, in the mountainous terrain at Kinsaiyok, the Japanese commandant had unexpectedly granted permission to hold a concert on Christmas Eve and an all-day yasume on Christmas Day. John Barnard suspected this "gift" came because "they are as bored and fed up with this existence as we are."⁵¹ But he and the other POWs were even more surprised when it was announced that the Japanese would take part in the Christmas Eve show. A "gigantic ant-hill" in an area "cleared for future hut building" was used as a stage.

A huge fire had been lit on either side of our improvised stage, and the large audience squatted all around the base, their faces lit up by the leaping flames. The concert itself was very poor, with the exception of a male voice choir which sang carols, and did so very well. The Nips themselves sang a few songs, which were rather quaint, but I'm afraid I was not in a mood to enjoy them.⁵²

Although Barnard appreciated the entertainers' efforts to cheer up the men, he was one of those POWs who couldn't shake off the overwhelming fact that they were prisoners of war. He characterized his first Christmas in Thailand as "the most depressing one I have ever spent."⁵³

1943

New Year's Celebrations

New Year celebrations would mark the end of the Christmas holidays. At Wampo Central, the concert party made a valiant attempt to keep the tired audience awake until 1943 was rung in. They were not entirely successful. "It was a good show but rather long." Rea thought. "It is tiresome sitting on the ground or on a piece of a log for hours on end and some people left before the concert was finished. Also, in order to get a seat you had to be in place by about 7:30 P.M. As a result people were tired and a little bit unresponsive. As an audience they didn't seem to indulge in that spontaneous enjoyment."⁵⁴

This was not entirely the audience's fault. Rea's further observation that the comedians "worked

^{xvi} Walker went on to write, "Among them was Jackie Gray whose lovely voice wafted that night through the jungle. It was Christmas and his beautiful rendering of "Silent Night" and later, "Trade Winds" will ever be with me."

hard” to get an audience response signals that the performers were overcompensating for their own lack of “being free in the moment.” In spite of sore bums, tired jokes, and oft-repeated songs, the POWs who remained were determined to enjoy the show. Rea stuck it out to the end:

The cast were all on stage and 1942 [1943?] appeared bearing a plate of rice. Col. Lilly was given a well-deserved and spontaneous reception. He made a speech wishing us and the world, peace and a speedy return home. . . . A Union Jack on a long bamboo pole was carried from the back of the audience to the front, gradually coming into sight of us all when it was lit up by the fires on either side of the stage.

This was followed by the choir leading the audience in singing “Auld Lang Syne” and other Scottish airs.⁵⁵

The concert party got away with their silent national anthem once again. This time the Union Jack’s appearance out of the darkness into the light was an even more dramatic and symbolic gesture.⁵⁶

Up at Kanyu, there had been a “watch-night service” on New Year’s Eve at which Stanley Gimson turned out in his battle-dress uniform to make his own symbolic statement about what the New Year would bring forth. The next day he wrote in his diary, “all felt equally certain of a happy ending to our pilgrimage before the year is out—It’s ‘in the bag’!!”⁵⁷ But “it” wasn’t “in the bag”; they were. Little did they know they still had two years and eight months of captivity to endure—and the worst was yet to come.

Consequences

Back at Wampo, the New Year’s festivities were unexpectedly extended into 2 January by a joint Japanese-Chinese-British concert that lasted from eight until midnight.⁵⁸ According to Godber, the Chinese performers were part of a group of about thirty men who had recently arrived in Wampo to be employed as “Tukan kayu” (carpenters).^{xvii59} British performers had been encouraged to participate to foster good relations with their captors.

Several POWs noted this unusual event in their diaries. George Wiseman was interested in recording the show’s content: “One Nip played the mouth organ then asked everybody to join in the chorus. Much to our surprise, his version of the chorus was the [British] national anthem. Few joined in but most did heartily on the word ‘Victorious.’ They had a gramophone on the side of the stage but hardly anybody heard it as the guard in charge was very drunk.”⁶⁰

Godber, on the other hand, had not been impressed with the concert: “I didn’t stay to see very much of it as the Jap numbers were very boring, nearly every item being announced as popular song. Well not understanding either their language or their music one couldn’t expect much.”⁶¹ But Rea, who lasted till around 10 p.m. before packing it in, commented on what was perhaps the show’s most important aspect: “The Japanese had their flag up this time. They wouldn’t agree to both flags. They said we had our turn with flags and it was their turn now. They love to copy us in everything.”⁶²

Celebrating the New Year was important to the Japanese as well. And the raising of the Union

^{xvii} This special group of skilled technicians must have been brought in to make sure the wooden viaduct would be built properly. The inclusion of Chinese, or *romusha*, as performers in the jungle concerts was extremely rare.

Jack in the POWs' Christmas and New Year's concerts without a like honoring of the Japanese flag had been an affront, so the captors had to find a way to right the injustice, occasioning the need for a second concert.^{xviii}

At Kanyu, the New Year's concert did not take place until 5 January. This time "Fizzer" Pearson was able to supplement his "cockney jokers" by showcasing performers he had discovered in the camp. With the show "[h]eld together by most excellent patter by Fizzer Pearson, and rounded off with selections by the choir, and a final 'Auld Lang Syne,'" Gimson called it "the best concert to date—it really was a treat."⁶³

A note in one of J. T. Rea's year-end diary entries reads: "We are glad to see the end of 1942. The only thing that can be said for 1942 is that it might have been worse though at times it seemed impossible for that to be so."⁶⁴ With the large contingent of Highlanders at Wampo Central, the month of January couldn't pass without celebration of another important Scottish tradition. On 25 January was a *Burns' Night* concert that included "a good many incomprehensible poems recited."⁶⁵

Dunlop Force

When rumors about a new contingent of POWs arriving on the railway began circulating in the camp, Rea speculated on what this might signify: "Dutch and Australian troops captured in Java are passing through Tarsao. The Japanese seemed determined to construct this railway and to keep us here during the wet season to do so."⁶⁶ This time the "borehole" rumor was right. On the very day the Highlanders in Wampo celebrated poet Robert Burns, medical officer Lieutenant-Colonel "Weary" Dunlop and his contingent of Australian and Dutch/Indonesian POWs known as "Dunlop Force" arrived in Kanyu/151 Kilo from Java after a brief sojourn in Changi, Singapore.

"They'll be Dropping Thousand-Pounders When They Come"

Exactly one month later, "Fizzer" Pearson and his fledgling concert party visited Dunlop's Kanyu camp to give his troops their first bit of entertainment.⁶⁷ "Our first concert had coincided with our first rain," Aussie Ray Parkin wrote.

The concert went on. *Things ain't the same my man Bill's 'ome from war*; the Far Eastern Brothers; lowdown on the Malayan Campaign—*frightfully* "General-Staff"; a duet of two strange fellows: one tough with a beard, was the tenor, while a boyish-faced, small-framed slender youth was the baritone; *They'll be coming round the mountain when they come*. Refrain: *They'll be dropping thousand-pounders when they come*; *Yeoman of England* and *Old Father Thames* (in excellent voice); a duet of a Scot and an Irishman with *The Little Yellow Idol*. Then, finally, a very good violin played while the rain streamed off the player. *God Save The King*, and it was over.⁶⁸

The "Far Eastern Brothers" was a takeoff on "The Western Brothers," a popular prewar British comedy duo. And the "two strange fellows" who sang the duet with its comic inversion of voice with

^{xviii} It is interesting to note that the Japanese show was more inclusive. Although they did not allow the British flag to be flown during the concert, they did include the British national anthem in their program.

appearance (the bearded tough-looking singer as tenor; the slender youth as baritone) were very likely Sam Drayton and Bobby Spong. (Spong had recently joined Pearson's troupe following his stint as the "Jungle Princess" in a makeshift Christmas pantomime at Chungkai.)

The parody of "She'll be Coming Round the Mountain"—first noted in a POW show in Bicycle Camp, Java, in 1942—would be sung lustily by the prisoners as a "resistance" song during concert parties on both sides of the railway. Given its overt seditious content, how did the POWs get away with it? And why did the Japanese sometimes join in singing it? It must have happened something like this: when some POW was learned that this folk song was well known to the Japanese, he risked altering the lyrics so when it was sung in a POW show, the Japanese, recognizing the tune but not understanding the new lyrics, would join in with their familiar ones instead. It was a clever ruse—and it worked!

The arrival of the "first rain" this early in the year was ominous. It foretold an early monsoon season that would only make living and working conditions more miserable, adding to the rapidly increasing numbers of POWs falling ill and dying.

Enter Han Samethini and Joop Postma

Back down the line, approximately 500 Dutch/Indonesian POWs from a new contingent of workers sent up from Singapore had been retained at Wampo South to join British POWs in the difficult task of cutting away the face of the rock cliff above the viaduct. Among them were the accordionist Han Samethini and comedian Joop Postma—both had been significantly involved in producing entertainment in their POW camp at Malang on Java. They would be among the most important entertainers in Thailand.

In contrast to the viaduct builders, who only had to work during daylight hours, the rock cutters manned shifts around the clock. For Felix Bakker, "the night-and-day work schedule was a killer, and the sharp stone fragments tore up our feet as most of us had no shoes left to wear. . . . After a while, you lost count of hours, days, nights. No more thoughts, only work, eat, sleep, work, eat, sleep. The lack of sleep brought most of us to utter exhaustion."⁶⁹ But torn feet and exhaustion did not stop Samethini from finding the energy and time to play his accordion to buoy the men's spirits.

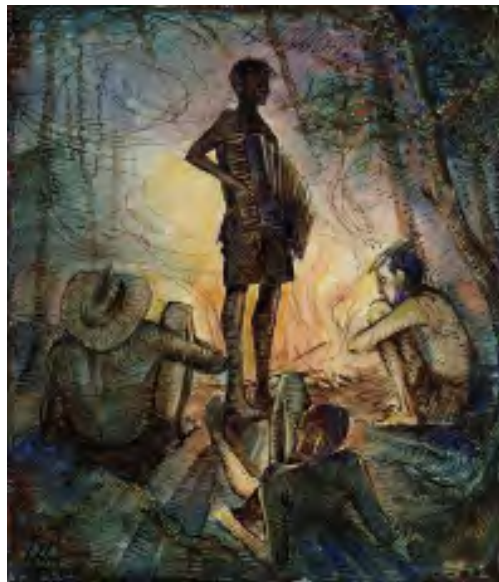


FIGURE 2.4. "KAMPVUUR IN DE JUNGLE." KEES VAN WILLIGEN. IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

The young, slender accordionist in this ink and watercolor by Kees van Willigen, though unidentified, could easily be Han Samethini.

Bigger And Better

Down in the viaduct-builders' camp, Woodhams was pushing to put on bigger and better productions. His show for February was an original revue entitled *Sincerely Yours*, which opened on the twenty-third. To create a further sense of normalcy, there were even handmade souvenir programs for sale.

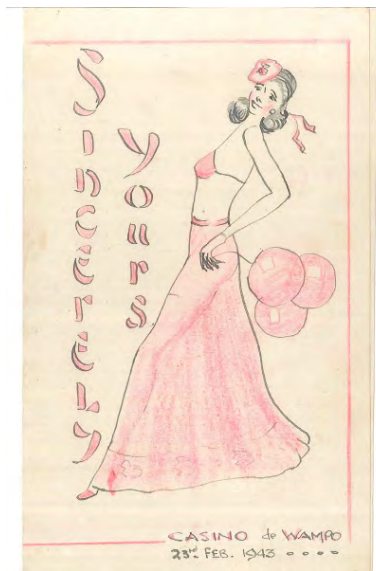


FIGURE 2.5. PROGRAM COVER FOR *SINCERELY YOURS*. IWM 93/17/1.

Girls, girls, girls! They were everywhere in this show. Following the successful reception of his “beauty chorus,” Woodhams had recruited two new “volunteers” willing to don wigs, dresses, and “falsies,” thereby increasing the size of his chorus from six to eight. From observers’ comments, it’s clear that Woodhams had become quite successful in training his female impersonators “to behave in a ladylike manner.” “They exceeded all our expectation,” Gale thought, “not only were the movements of their legs and arms graceful and ladylike, but they had even learned what to do with their hands when still. Several of them sang songs in passable contralto and their dancing was really excellent.”⁷⁰

For a stunned John Godber, the transformation in the “girls” went well beyond demeanor; they had sexual allure: “They had been chosen for their figures and really the illusion was perfect & pretty nifty looking pieces some of them made.”⁷¹ In fact, the impersonators so skillfully created the illusion of femininity that a couple of local Thais who wandered in and watched the show spread the news that the Japanese had imprisoned some European women along with the men.⁷²

With beautiful new wigs made out of teased old rope by Bill Latham, a London barber,⁷³ and “beautiful swinging dresses from mosquito nets—homemade brassieres with homemade fillings,”⁷⁴ Godber thought *Sincerely Yours* “by far the most ambitious thing they attempted here yet, and it really was a splendid show.”⁷⁵

Cholera

On 26 February, Weary Dunlop recorded in his diary that cholera had broken out upriver and the men were now forbidden to swim in the Kwai Noi or use river water to clean their teeth.⁷⁶ News of this fearful disease spread quickly up and down the line.



FIGURE 2.6. "CHOLERA TENTS – KANYU." JACK CHALKER. COURTESY OF JACK CHALKER.

When Jimmy Walker, still at Wang Lun/069 Kilo, suddenly collapsed, he was "carried back into camp as the first suspected cholera case." When he came to, he was lying on the floor in the hospital back down the line at Nong Pladuk/000 Kilo "looking up at Hank's grinning face!"⁷⁷ Walker hadn't seen Hank Phillips, his old comedy partner in Keppel Harbour days, since their arrival in Ban Pong in October 1942. Fortunately, Walker did not have cholera; he stayed on at Nong Pladuk until he was well again.

Anckorn's Disappearing Act

In his Wampo camp, the magician Fergus Anckorn found he couldn't quite pull off an escape act. When the Wampo viaduct scaffolding was complete, he was told to climb to the top and start coating it with boiling-hot creosote in order to protect it from the elements and destructive wood-eating ants. But since receiving severe injuries in the battle for Singapore, Anckorn suffered from vertigo. He tried to tell the Japanese engineer that he couldn't do it, "and he immediately went and got a bamboo pole to beat me up." Given this additional inducement, Anckorn started climbing. It was a long way up. When he got to the top, he froze: he couldn't look down, he couldn't let go of the scaffolding, he couldn't even open his eyes. The engineer bellowed at him to start work, but he couldn't move.

And he came up after me. Took him about thirty seconds, up like a monkey, right. And he flung all the creosote over me. And I remember, I put my head [down] so none of it hit my face—I had this hat thing on. But the rest—it was all over me—and a hundred degrees at the time. And I just started blistering everywhere: one huge blister. I looked awful. And pain too. I don't know how I got myself down, but I did. And when I was near enough to the river, I flopped

*into the river.*⁷⁸

Now Anckorn could disappear: “I looked so awful they put me on a low loader truck and sent me down country [to] Chungkai, where I spent the next eight months.”⁷⁹

“Duet”

At Kanyu/151 Kilo, Dunlop Force had no further visits from the English entertainers, so, pulling together the few remaining performers from their own concert party formed earlier on Java, they produced a variety show on 6 March. Two men singing duets were the highlight of the evening—the harmony of their voices able to create a hope and camaraderie that dispelled fears of the dark jungle enveloping them.⁸⁰



FIGURE 2.7. “THE DUET.” RAY PARKIN. COURTESY OF RAY PARKIN.

Australian POW artist Ray Parkin captured this evocative moment in a painting he reproduced for this investigation. The two figures dimly seen on the right standing on a pile of sleepers (railroad ties) for a stage, are etched by the light coming from the bonfire. It is just possible to make out the heads of the POW audience in the background.⁸¹

“The Speedo”: March-October

The actual start of the intensive construction period known as “the Speedo” is hard to pin down. Not everyone agrees on a specific date, but it began sometime in the early spring of 1943. “The Speedo” meant an increase not only in the tempo of the work but in how much had to be accomplished daily. Fulfilling quotas dictated from Tokyo required longer and longer work days. The consequences of this forced drive to complete the railway to its new deadline would, for the POWs, be physically and psychologically catastrophic.

Massive migrations of railway workers began to take place concurrently with the start of “the Speedo.” As POWs and romusha completed their tasks at one site, they were not moved to the next camp up the line but instead leap-frogged to a new construction site. Once the Wampo viaduct was finished, the

POWs there moved to Tonchan South/131 Kilo. Before leaving Woodhams produced the second edition of *Sincerely Yours* on 25 March. Han Samethini and the other Dutch/Indonesians working on the cliff face were eventually sent to a camp north of Kinsaiyok/171 Kilo. In this way, the railway construction kept moving steadily forward. While these “internal” migrations were taking place, thousands of new POWs from Singapore, along with newly conscripted romusha, arrived to supplement a work force depleted by sickness and death.

On 17 March, Dunlop Force was moved to Hintok Road Camp/154 Kilo. The Hintok/154–157 Kilo camps were contiguous with those at Kanyu, and the POWs faced similar tasks: clearing the area in preparation for construction, building bridges over ravines, and cutting the railway trace along hillsides. Once that work was complete, they would begin the arduous task of cutting down through the limestone with little more than “hammer and tap” (sledgehammers and chisels).

While Dunlop and his men were setting up their new camp, the Japanese engineers began implementing “the Speedo.” The new “work rules” required all the POWs, even those classified as “light sick” (ambulatory) or without boots, at the work sites. Dunlop was furious with this change—he believed it close to premeditated murder—but he was helpless to stop it.⁸²



FIGURE 2.8. “HINTOK CUTTING.” JACK CHALKER. COURTESY OF JACK CHALKER.

In late March, Jack Chalker made the short trek from Kanyu to Hintok as part of a line maintenance party. While there he made sketches that resulted in the watercolor above, documenting the POWs working in the “Hintok Cutting.”

Monsoon

As anticipated, 1943 was a year in which the annual rainy season arrived early, worsening the conditions in which the POWs had to eat, work, and sleep. When the dirt access road became impassible, the Kwai Noi served as the major lifeline for food and supplies. When the river, too, became unnavigable due to turbulence caused by heavy rains falling higher up in the mountains, rations did not arrive as scheduled and the POWs were put on an even more restricted starvation diet. Visiting Kanyu/151 Kilo at the end of March, Norman Smith was appalled by what he found: “Everything was dripping wet due to the rains. In the daytime the flies and mosquitoes bred in thousands. Malaria and dysentery were rife and the influx of the sick to Kanyu made it imperative to reduce the numbers to make room for them.”⁸³ There was no time or energy for sing-alongs.

In late March or early April, the Japanese made an attempt to ease the overcrowding in work camp hospitals by moving the chronically ill (“heavy sick”) to a large field hospital set up at the staging camp at Tarsao/125 Kilo. With this new facility and additional medical personnel, the captors hoped the POWs would recover from their illnesses more quickly so they could be put back to work. But when that hospital, too, became overcrowded, new heavy sick cases were sent back down the line to the hospitals being established in the base camps at Chungkai, Tamarkan, and Kanburi.



FIGURE 2.9. “LEAVING KANU.” JACK CHALKER. COURTESY OF JACK CHALKER.

Like the wretches pictured in his sketch “Leaving Kanu,” Jack Chalker was one of those sent to Chungkai; he suffered from acute dysentery and dengue fever.

Cancellation Notices

With the pressure on to meet the new construction deadline, yasume days for the POWs on the

railway became infrequent and formal concert parties disappeared as the prisoners struggled to hang on to some sort of entertainment. On 3 April when the prisoners' scheduled yasume day at Hintok Road Camp was shortened and all the men had to work for an hour and a half that morning, Weary Dunlop was pleased to see they still went ahead with their planned sing-along that evening.⁸⁴ Their next yasume wasn't until three weeks later, and again Dunlop was able to record that their morale continued to be high and a moonlight concert was well attended.⁸⁵

"Brought Back To Life"

From its beginning, Tarsao/125 Kilo had been a terrible place. Laurie Allison, who was there in late 1942 when it was a work camp, remembered it well: "If we thought Chungkai was bad, Tarsao was as Hell is to Purgatory. The camp was distressing and there was none of the divertissements that had given some semblance of living to Chungkai. There was no entertainment and it was a long hard working day on return from which, a wash, a feed and then to bed and to be woken at break of light the following morning."⁸⁶

During the former Wampo POWs' stopover at Tarsao on the way to their next work site, Len Gibson sat in one of the hospital huts strumming his guitar to vent his sorrow over a friend who had just passed away. Paradoxically, his playing revived David Ffolkes, one of the other patients, who had been given up for dead:

I approach the moment when we first met. . . . Do you remember? I bet you don't!! I do . . . in that terrible hut in Tarso [sic], when I half-dead, and drifting into a coma, was brought back to life by you playing a guitar; you so sad, because a friend of yours from Sunderland had just died because of a leg amputation.⁸⁷

Before leaving Tarsao for Tonchan South, Gibson and his performer-buddies Charley Carney and Michael Conlin developed a new specialty act: "We called ourselves 'The Andrew Twisters'^{xix} and sang their hits as well as those of Carmen Miranda."^{xx88} It was also at Tarsao that Gibson composed a piece for his guitar that tried "to describe the wildness of the Jungle at the start of the rainy season."^{xxi89}

As the Wampo POWs were soon to discover, the railway construction in the mountainous region beyond Tarsao would prove the most challenging. "[Tarsao] was the end of the 'easy' stretch and the start of hell," wrote Jimmy Walker.⁹⁰

"Come On and Join Us"

When they arrived at Tonchan South/131 Kilo, the Wampo POWs were disheartened to learn they were to be billeted in tents. As Gibson and Carney cleared the area to set up the tents, they realized Conlin was missing from the duty fatigues. When he returned toward mealtime, they kidded him about "dodging the column." But Michael looked very serious. "You should see in those huts over there. That's where I've been. They're full of sick men and they're like skeletons. The Japs have just left them. They've had no music

^{xix} A parody of the American group "The Andrew Sisters," known for singing in close harmony.

^{xx} Carmen Miranda was the "Brazilian bombshell" singer who appeared in early 1940s Hollywood films dressed in outrageous costumes and tall headdresses topped with bananas and other fruit.

^{xxi} Scored for a camp orchestra, Gibson's composition would be played in Nakhon Pathom (see Chapter 8: "Breakout").

or entertainment since they've been here. I think we should do something for them."⁹¹

Gibson and Carney agreed. After the evening meal, Len grabbed his guitar, the others took lighted torches, and all three dragged bundles of dead bamboo across a small bridge to the other side of the river to start a bonfire for their performance.

We chose a spot in the clearing about twenty yards from the sick men's huts, heaped up the dead kindling and set it alight. A Jap sentry appeared out of the jungle to see what was afoot and must have got quite a shock when we started to dance around the fire singing, "Come on and join us." . . .

With the Jap sentry looking on in bewilderment we pranced around until Charley was almost on the point of collapse.

And then at last it happened. Several skeletons emerged from the huts and walked unsteadily towards us shielding their eyes from the brightness of our fire.

For a while they stood staring at the ground in front of them, then slowly sat down. Once their eyes became accustomed to the glare of the fire they looked into the flames and not at us. Red and Charley went straight into their routine doing all the jokes which usually brought roars of laughter. The audience was unmoved. The rest of us took it in turn to try to stir some reaction but without success. Even Charley's impersonation of Shirley Temple singing "Good Ship Lollipop" failed to move—or so we thought—but when we performed our final piece and thanked them for listening they responded with an applause which, though not vigorous, was probably done with the maximum of strength left in their frail bodies.

We had to help some of them to their feet and after just a nod of the head they returned to their dreadful huts.

So ended our first night in South Tonchan. Next morning it was back to work on the railway.⁹²

With "the Speedo" in effect, there would be no Wampo concert party productions at Tonchan South—nor would the company perform again until after the Burma and Thai halves of the railway were joined.

At the end of April, J. T. Rea recorded two important events in his diary. The first was the appearance of a Japanese cinema unit showing newsreels of their victorious Malayan campaign as well as other items to the whole camp. Since this event coincided with Emperor Hirohito's birthday, which was April 29, the I. J. A. may have intended the films to bolster their troops' resolve during their extended tour of duty in the jungle—especially now as they were implementing "the Speedo." There would be other attempts by the I. J. A. to keep their troops' morale high, including touring military bands and "comfort women."^{xxii}

^{xxii} These "comfort women" were frequently Korean women, but women from other conquered nations were also forced into this notorious military-sponsored prostitution as well.

The second important event was an update on the railway's progress: "The railway track was laid past Wampoh [*sic*] Central Camp on the 18th of April and it is now through to this camp. There were a couple of days hold up because some bridges had not been finished though men were working on them day and night."⁹³

"Roll Out the Barrel"

A fully recovered Jimmy Walker was back on the line as part of this rail-laying crew. A few days later, in the narrow confines of the twelve-foot-high clay walls of the Tampai Cutting at 148 Kilo, Walker discovered another reason for singing: "The pinnacle of our anguish in all the long years of our incarceration was reached that night in the Tampai Cutting. There must be a point in human misery when the soul shrieks out in rebellion; when all logical thought, all hope, is squeezed out by the unbearable weight of despair. The sheer ultimate in misery-produced madness."⁹⁴ Working at night in a downpour, Walker's crew was offloading steel rails from a succession of rail trucks onto the teak sleepers buried in the mud below. Cold, wet, and pushed to work at a fanatical pace—they had been laboring eighteen hours without food—"the slaves" suddenly began to sing:

"Roll out the Barrel" reverberated up that clammy canyon. It was roared out, shrieked out. It was vaguely musical and yet menacing. There was defiance in it, lunacy too. The rails were literally flung into the ooze. Wild eyes shone from mud splashed faces.

"We'll have a barrel of fun!"

The panicked Japanese officer in charge, hearing the hostile tone in their singing, jumped from the truck and called for the POW officer in charge.

Both officers knew, deep within them, that it was not a song they were hearing but the roaring waves of revolution.

The truck was emptied of its rails with fantastic speed. Then, with the cessation of activity, the song ceased. Men, panting, leaned against the clay silently awaited the next truckload.⁹⁵

Walker and the rail-laying crew were not the first slaves to find strength and solidarity in singing.

"Hellfire Pass"

By 25 April the area for the Kanyu Cutting was finally cleared and the POWs started to chisel down through the hill of solid rock with "hammer and tap."⁹⁶ As POWs from completed segments of the railway, as well as new reinforcements from Singapore, passed through neighboring Hintok on their way to camps further up the line, 600 were retained at Kanyu to ensure that the cutting would be completed on schedule. With numerous fires burning for illumination so the work could continue at night, the site resembled

something out of Gustave Doré's illustrations for Dante's *Inferno*. The POWs gave Kanyu Cutting the nickname "Hellfire Pass."

F Force

"A Pleasant Hilly Place"

One of the new POW contingents from Singapore was the ill-fated "F Force," composed of 7,000 British and Australian soldiers. As it had been increasingly difficult to find enough fit troops left in Changi to send Up Country, all the remaining members of the British 18th Division headquarters were placed on this draft, including Lieutenant-Colonel F. J. Dillon and Captain Charles Wilkinson. When the Japanese were informed that the numbers were lacking, the men were told "This was NOT a working party" and ordered to make up the quota by taking unfit POWs with them "so they would have a better chance of recovery with good food and in a pleasant hilly place with facilities for recreation."⁹⁷ Since Dillon and Wilkinson were ardent promoters of entertainment as important to any welfare program, there was every attempt to include musicians and other entertainers in the F Force drafts.

Four of the six members of the "Changi Celebrity Artists" received marching orders, including their producer, the padre and singer John Foster-Haigh, concert pianist Reginald Renison, baritone George Wall, and light tenor Aubrey King.^{xxiii} They were ordered to bring along bands with all their musical instruments, which in this case included three pianos.⁹⁸ Renison, who had told Fergus Anckorn that he "couldn't go on without his music which was his life" if placed on an Up Country draft, would have something to sustain him. During his last concert in Changi, he played Chopin's "Etude Op. 10 No. 3" so beautifully that those in attendance would hold on to it as a sublime moment that would remain forever in memory.⁹⁹

Morale was high as F Force departed Singapore in a series of drafts between 18 and 30 April. They were escaping Changi with its boring routine. Arriving at Ban Pong, the POWs were shocked to learn they had to march to their new camps; there were many unfit, barely ambulatory men in their midst. "Off we went," Signelman Alec Johnston bravely wrote, "whistling and singing our old favorite tunes. It would be the first and last time we did."¹⁰⁰ They soon discovered the Japanese promises were all lies. Their "rest camps" were actually work camps in the mountains near the Burmese border more than 186 miles away.

In a terrible twist of fate (as well as a turf war), F Force was not placed under the I. J. A. Southern Command but kept as a separate entity responsible to I. J. A. Malayan Command back in Singapore. The lack of cooperation between these two organizations greatly magnified the difficulty F Force had in getting food, medical services, and accommodations along the route of their march—and made conditions even worse at their border camps.

The three pianos brought from Singapore were left behind at Ban Pong with assurances that they would follow by truck. The men never saw them again. For many of the unfit who had expected to recuperate in the healthier hill-station climate, the long trudge up country through mud in the pouring rain turned into a death march. Reginald Renison, the brilliant concert pianist, was one of those brutally beaten to death and hastily buried in a roadside grave.¹⁰¹

When F Force reached the first of the work camps at Lower Nikki/276 Kilo in early May, they had endured two and a half weeks of forced marches. Cholera, which they picked up from being housed in a romusha camp on the way, soon ravaged their numbers. The work and living conditions at their

^{xxiii} Those not included in the draft were violinist Denis East and piano accompanist Cyril Wycherley. It's possible that more of the 18th Division "Optimists" concert party and/or "The New Windmill Players," were included in F Force.

construction sites along the border would be among the worst on the Thai side of the railway. There would be no yasume days or recreation for the F Force men.

The devastating effects of “the Speedo” on the POWs were by now fully apparent everywhere along the railway. Hundreds of Allied POWs and romusha were dying from hunger, disease, never-ending hard physical work, and the unimaginable brutal tactics employed by the Japanese engineers to finish their project. To satisfy the growing desperation for more laborers to supplement the work force being decimated by “the Speedo,” an additional 3,270 POWs—“H Force”—were sent up from Changi in May to join workers at Tonchan South and the Kanyu Cutting.

“No Music. No Theatre.”

June, July, and August were the worst months of “the Speedo.” In order to meet the October deadline, the Japanese engineers increased the tempo of the work, driving the POWs and romusha ever more mercilessly. With the growing shortage of workers, the Japanese engineers insisted on a further change in the “work rules.” Over POW medical officers’ vociferous objections—and sometimes those of the Japanese POW administration as well—heavy sick were ordered carried to the railway line, where they could break rocks with hammers for ballasting.¹⁰² “The men on the whole were in despair,” wrote Colonel Dillon, describing not only his F Force troops but the mental state of all the POWs working on the railway. “The choices in front of them seemed to be death from disease or never-ending toil and brutal treatment at the hands of the engineers. Their officers were unable to protect them in spite of all their efforts.”¹⁰³ At Rin Tin/183 Kilo, the young Dutch artist Jan van Holthe tried to document this criminal activity.

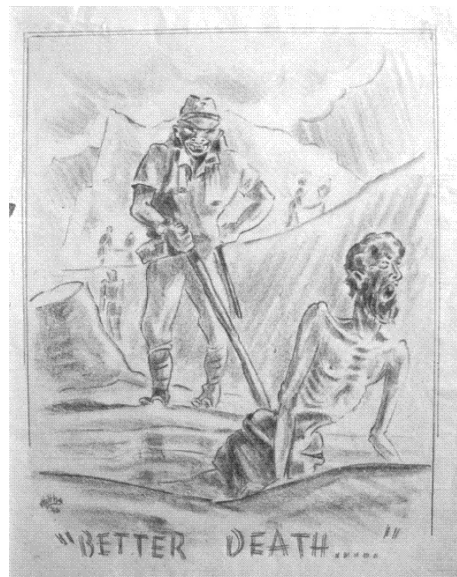


FIGURE 2.10. “BETTER DEATH.” JAN VAN HOLTHE. COURTESY OF NORMAN PRITCHARD.

At Naka Songkurai/294 Kilo, Charles Frisby, the trumpet player who had urged the establishment of concert parties in Changi because of the good they could do for morale, sadly observed, “The two hospital

longhouses were full to overflowing whilst the three remaining huts also held patients—these were the ones whose illnesses could be attended to where they lay. . . . Our existence was bound within an acre of dense jungle. There were no concert parties in the pass! No music. No theatre. There was only the basest thread of life remaining, but still the true gravity of our position was yet to hit us!”¹⁰⁴

The “true gravity” soon became evident. Cholera spread rapidly among the F Force border camps and then down to camps on either side. When the epidemic reached Takanun Base Camp at 223 Kilo, one of their medical officers, Hugh “Ginger” de Wardener, volunteered to care for the cholera patients in an isolation tent.^{xxiv} At Tonchan South/131 Kilo, the Wampo POWs lost many of their comrades to the disease.¹⁰⁵ In some camps, burial parties were so overwhelmed with the number of dead that mass graves were dug to dispose of the bodies.



FIGURE 2.11. MASS GRAVE. THUMBNAIL SKETCH. ROBERT BRAZIL. COURTESY OF ROBERT BRAZIL.

In other camps, cremation was instituted in an attempt to stop the disease from spreading. Naka Songkurai became a death camp. Of the original 1,600 British POWs from F Force sent there, 600 died horribly. The baritone George Wall and the light tenor Aubrey King—two men who had brought such pleasure to the Changi POWs with their music—were among those who perished.¹⁰⁶

“Trumpeter What Are You Sounding Now?”

On Sunday 27 June at an F Force encampment on the Burma side of the border,^{xxv} padre John Foster-Haigh surveyed the worsening health conditions and morale in his camp and agonized over whether he could do anything to make a difference:

^{xxiv} He would later receive an MBE (Member of the Order of the British Empire) decoration for this service.

^{xxv} Possibly Changara/301 Kilo.

Like the Israelites I find it difficult sometimes to sing the Lord's song in a strange land. Around us the wild Jungle exists—the home of tigers, elephants, snakes, & countless other creatures. Disease is rampant & the crowning difficulty are the roads, food shortage & the monsoon. . . . Nothing is really organized here at the moment. All fit men are taken out on working parties. Our lot is a hard one & the history of our settlement a most tragic one. Cholera is rampant & has taken over two hundred & forty of our men. Now small-pox & malaria have broken out & we are in a serious plight regarding medical stores. Our crude hospitals are full—out of 1350 men over 900 are sick. Dysentery & acute diarrhea play havoc & tropical ulcers seem to be inescapable. Exhaustion after the march & emaciation from the lack of food take their toll. We hear no cheerie conversation, no ribald songs, no sound of laughter. Long faces & embittered men live here. The going is hard. The life bitter. No church exists. Services are held in the different huts, & I have four today. Our task is Herculean for I am sure one of the great things we have to do is to infuse these men with new hope. . . . It is not easy. But when I think of all that these men have gone through & all the loved ones at home waiting their return I feel no effort is too great if by means of it these men recover their fighting spirit. I don't know which is worse—their battles or imprisonment. Sometimes one thinks the former is the easier lot.¹⁰⁷

Foster-Haigh was keenly aware of the power of song and laughter to heal not only the psychic wounds but the physical as well. George McNeilly, the Australian YMCA representative who had sponsored Foster-Haigh's "Celebrity Artists" concerts in Changi, wrote that he was "a wonderful man and a great artist. He never tired of singing in the wards to the dying men and I can hear his voice now 'Trumpeter what are you sounding now, is it the call I'm seeking?'" This song had been Foster-Haigh's favorite encore number. It would soon be his turn to heed the call. Foster-Haigh died Up Country—of malnutrition.¹⁰⁸

An Animal-like Existence

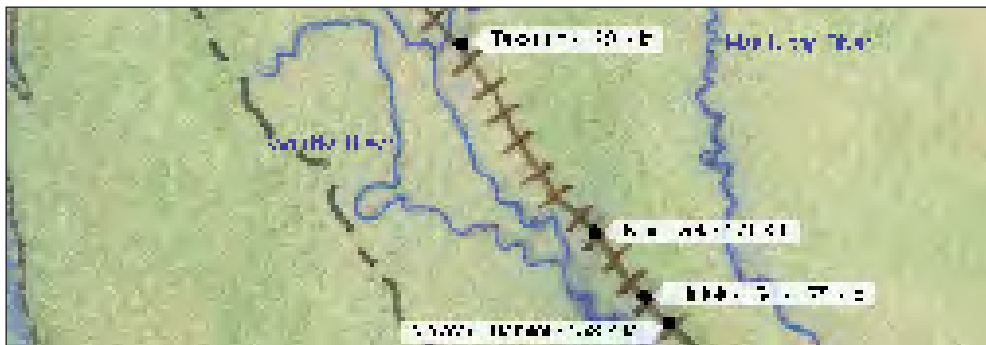


FIGURE 2.12. THAILAND RAILWAY MAP #2: HINTOK—TAKANUN.

Could conditions get any worse? To complete the bridges, embankments, and cuttings at Hintok, the POWs there had continued to work night and day without rest. By 15 July, after cholera had taken a

terrible toll in the camp and severely reduced the work force, Dunlop noted that his POWs had worked sixty-two days without a yasume day; by 15 August it would be eighty days.¹⁰⁹ Their evening singsongs and moonlight concerts had long since disappeared. This was true everywhere on the railway.

In the past, Tom Boardman had played his camp-made ukulele to entertain himself and others in his hut. That impulse had disappeared. In a succinct telegraphic style, he summed up his four months at 226 Kilo, the Takanun overflow camp:^{xxvi}

May 1943—August 1943—Takanon [*sic*—A horrible camp—worst experience of captivity—monsoon season developed rain—rain—rain—accommodated in tent liners—rained in—cholera strikes—many dead—malaria—dysentery—bathing in R. Kwai forbidden—lice—crabs—bridge and railway work—Tamils . . .—very depressed and weary—mosquitoes galore.¹¹⁰

Stripped of their humanity, the POWs were reduced to living an animal-like existence. In order to survive, men suppressed their emotional life, sealing off their feelings for the sick and dying in their midst, and focused their whole attention on their own survival from one day to the next. The truly fortunate had a mate they could count on to care for them if they got sick. Without sing-alongs or any type of impromptu concerts, the camaraderie they promoted disappeared and with them reminders of the men's culture and values.

Welfare Attempts

Despite the horror all around them, some POW officers and other ranks tried to combat the emotional and psychological toll the unbearable situation was taking on those who remained alive. The doctors did all they could to keep the physical body going despite being thwarted by the lack of medicines and proper surgical equipment. But their efforts weren't enough: there had to be something to sustain the spirit as well. As he had done back in Changi, Lieutenant John Coast encouraged other officers in Takanun/223 Kilo to join him in an "educational scheme":

As more than half the camp were so sick after six weeks that even the Nips couldn't see how to get work out of such derelict bodies, we tried to organise every conceivable type of lecture and talk to interest the sick men in the dreary hours which they must otherwise spend lying silently and painfully on their bamboo slats . . .—anything was of interest to those interest-starved men, and the most boring lecture was greedily listened to. Also, we took it in turns whenever we could to read books to them.¹¹¹

The men at Takanun were also fortunate in having "the indefatigable Frankie Quinton who had carried his accordion all the way up county, and who on many evenings, having done a day's work, gave the lads a half-hour of 'old favourites' in one or other tent, or he would even play while they queued up for the

^{xxvi} In POW literature this camp is identified as 226 K, but it has more recently been identified as Takanun North/225 Kilo.

evening meal. All these things helped.”¹¹²



FIGURE 2.13. FRANKIE QUINTON. PRE-WAR PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF TOM BOARDMAN.

Down the line in the Kanyu camps, the POWs had not been so fortunate. Norman Smith, who suffered from debilitating bouts of amoebic dysentery, had contracted beriberi, and “Fizzer” Pearson persuaded their medical officer to send Smith downriver to a base hospital camp so he could receive better care. His departure would jeopardize the fate of his “cooks and batmen” musicians.

Fortunately, the doctor at Kanyu had been “a keen supporter of the entertainments we had organized both back in Changi and around the bonfires in Kanu [*sic*]. He contrived a way to keep together as many of the actors, singers and orchestra as he could, putting us on the list for the first barges to arrive for moving us south.”¹¹³ Smith and his “light-er sick” musicians were sent to the base hospital at Chungkai. Pearson, Spong, and the other “cockney jokers” would soon follow. But by the time it was their turn to go downriver, Chungkai was so crammed with the sick and dying that they would be retained temporarily across the river at Tamarkan instead.

“The Show Must Go On”

When the former Wampo POWs arrived at Kinsaiyok Main Camp at the end of July, they were immediately put to work with the others trying to complete a long earthen causeway for the railway trace using rocks quarried in one of the camps as ballast.^{xxvii} During their next two and a half months at Kinsaiyok, there would be no opportunity for a concert party—or even impromptu sing-alongs. As Han Samethini passed through Kinsaiyok on his way to a work camp farther up the line, he learned that his brother, Frank, was in one of the hospital tents there. He was given ten minutes to visit before his unit moved on.¹¹⁴

One of the few records of entertainment taking place during the worst months of “the Speedo” are

^{xxvii} Kinsaiyok Jungle Camp 3/159 Kilo, Kinsaiyok Jungle Camp 1/161 Kilo, Kinsaiyok Jungle Camp 2/168 Kilo, and Kinsaiyok Main Camp/171 Kilo.

those in which Jimmy Walker appeared. By August, Walker and his rail-laying crew were “somewhere in the Kinsaiyok area.” He recalled “a typical night” in camp:

After a 15 hour shift with the Rail Gang I stagger back into camp. Absolutely knackered. But even before I reach my bed space, I hear, “Walker, old man, I’ve arranged with the Dutch chappies to put on a show tonight. How about some of that stuff you did at Keppel? . . . You will? . . . Oh, good show.” The officer is vibrant, well rested and well fed. He has no conception of the work done on the railway by skeleton slaves like myself . . . the show must go on!¹¹⁵

Walker’s first impulse had been to refuse, but he couldn’t resist the call to help his fellow POWs.

I wrack my brains for something I can do alone which will be amusing to a multi-lingual audience. Unlike the previous concert party at Keppel Harbour in Singapore, audiences in the deep jungle could well be a mixture of races and languages. Men of the Dutch East Indies, black and white from Java and Sumatra: all Dutch.

I recall my father telling me about a comedian of our native Tyneside, named “J. C. Scatter.” His act, which I had never seen, about a miner, very tipsy having enjoyed his Saturday night in Newcastle. He awaits his home bound bus to Seaton Burn, a mining village 3 or 4 miles north of the city whilst eating from a paper of fish and chips.

He staggers on to the bus but he is too late to get a seat and must stand in the aisle and now having the tricky job of hanging on to the safety strap while holding and eating his supper. As the bus swerves and rocks he falls on seated passengers, raises his cap in apology and thus reaches his destination—all this done in mime.

Once on the roadway he staggers along whilst eating. Paper empty, he slaps and crumples it then throws it to the ground. He stumbles, walks a few yards, stops, turns around, gazes at the discarded paper-ball and then totters back to where it lies. After a few tumbling efforts, he stands erect and opens out the paper. With studied precision he forms the old newspaper into a gutter and directs the drains of vinegar down his throat. That done, he again ceremoniously makes a paper-ball and throws it down. Again he staggers off, stops, turns and retrieves the paper. This time he takes off his cap, throws it [to] earth, picks up the paper, carefully smooths it out and rubs the greasy side on his hair. Finally the paper is thrown away, he gropes around, finds and dons his cap and exits left.¹¹⁶

The “Dutch chappies” Walker mentioned also rose to the occasion: “Some camp ‘business-men’

would boil up a mixture of burnt rice and Goola-Malacca sugar and sell it as ‘hot sweet coffee.’ At one show the Dutch lads were singing a song in their own language and I asked for a translation. It was, ‘It is hot. It is sweet. But it is NOT coffee.’”¹¹⁷

Signs of Relief

By mid-August, the monsoon rains started to abate. With the improved weather conditions, the Kanyu and Hintok cuttings neared completion. As they did, the intensity of “the Speedo” for the POW and romusha work force there began to lessen. When the Hintok Cutting was finished on 26 August, the Japanese commandant declared they would celebrate the accomplishment with a yasume the next day—the first in over three months.¹¹⁸

For the romusha, celebrations included a coming-of-age ritual for two young Tamil boys and Muslims celebrating Ramadan. For the POWs, there was no celebration.¹¹⁹ The human cost incurred in the maniacal drive to complete the cuttings at Hintok and Kanyu had been too great. In July, cholera had taken a terrible toll in the Hintok camps. At nearby Hellfire Pass, the POWs and romusha had been forced to work in twelve- to eighteen-hour shifts as they struggled to cut down through the limestone to a depth of nearly sixty-six feet (twenty meters). By the time this cutting was finished, 400 POWs and countless romusha had died.¹²⁰ Similar horror stories could be told about camps up and down the line.



FIGURE 2.14. THAILAND RAILWAY MAP #3. TAKANUN—KONKOITA.

As the railway construction pushed on toward completion, those in the work camps at the lower end of the line, like the POWs at Hintok, found yasume days reinstituted. At the railhead, where the railway was still under construction, the POWs continued to be driven mercilessly.

Everywhere on the railway was an enormous hunger for something to relieve the stress of the unending labor and brutality that had wreaked havoc on minds and bodies—some distraction to take them out of themselves for a few moments, like the lectures and sing-alongs at Takanun that had proven so helpful. One evening in the staging/transit camp at Tarsao, John Brennan noted that a Dutch POW passing through “sat on a log with a slush lamp alongside him, played a guitar and sang. In a short time he had an audience of several hundred men listening to hit parade songs of the pre-war era.”¹²¹ In most camps, listening to music had not been possible for months.

Finally, on 17 October 1943, the two ends of the railway were joined near Konkoita/263 Kilo, Thailand. “The Speedo” was over.

In contrast to the Thailand side of the railway, the POW workers on the Burma side were primarily Australian, Dutch/Indonesian, and American. Although their construction experience was similar to that on the Thailand side—except for the Allied bombing raids they endured—the “jungle shows” they produced to help them survive were not. Variety shows, farces, pantomimes, and cabarets—topped by the hilarious Aussie antics subverting a Japanese attempt to produce a propaganda film—make their story unique.

Endnotes

- 1 See David Boggett, “Notes on the Thai-Burma Railway,” Parts I–IX, XI, Journal of Kyoto Seika University (2000–2005).
- 2 See MacPherson Naming Standards, http://www.mansell.com/pow_resources/camplists/death_rr/deathrailwaycamp.html.
- 3 Allison, *Begone Dull Care*, 62.
- 4 Walker, *Of Rice and Men*, 23.
- 5 Peek, 26.
- 6 Rea, Diary, 27 November 1942.
- 7 Gibson, Memoir, 2.
- 8 Chalker, Letter, 3 March 2000.
- 9 Chalker, Letter, 3 March 2000.
- 10 Norman Smith, 35–36.
- 11 Gibson, Memoir, 2–3.
- 12 Rea, Diary, 27 November 1942.
- 13 Peek, 44.
- 14 Peek, 102.
- 15 Gibson, Memoir, 3.
- 16 Gibson, Memoir, 3.
- 17 Gale, Diary, 2? December 1942.
- 18 Gale, Diary, 2? December 1942.
- 19 Peek, 44.
- 20 Peek, 44–45; Godber, Diary, 1 December 1942.
- 21 Peek, 44–45.
- 22 Peek, 45.
- 23 Godber, Diary, 1 December 1942.
- 24 Peek, 45–46.
- 25 Peek, 45–46.
- 26 Wiseman, Diary, 1 December 1942.
- 27 Godber, Diary, 1 December 1942.
- 28 Peek, 46–47.
- 29 Godber, Diary, 1 December 1942.
- 30 Gibson, Memoir, 2–4.
- 31 Gibson, Memoir, 2–4.
- 32 Gibson, Memoir, 2–4.
- 33 Peek, 102.
- 34 Gibson, Memoir, 4.
- 35 Peek, 102.
- 36 Gibson, Memoir, 4.
- 37 Gibson, Memoir, 4.
- 38 Godber, Diary, 10 December 1942.
- 39 Chalker, Letter, 3 March 2000.
- 40 Gimson, Diary, 25 December 1942.

- 41 Chalker, Letter, 3 March 2000.
- 42 Gimson, Diary, 25 December 1942.
- 43 Rea, Diary, 25 December 1942.
- 44 Rea, Diary, 26 December 1942.
- 45 Rea, Diary, 26 December 1942.
- 46 Gibson, Memoir, 3.
- 47 Gibson, Memoir, 3.
- 48 Rea, Diary, 26 December 1942.
- 49 Rea, Diary, 27 December 1942.
- 50 Walker, *Of Rice and Men*, 79.
- 51 Barnard, 60.
- 52 Barnard, 60–61.
- 53 Barnard, 60.
- 54 Rea, Diary, 2 January 1943.
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- 56 Rea, Diary, 2 January 1943.
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Chapter 3: “Jungle Shows” Burma

The shows created for men and by men battling against killer-despair and to retain sanity.

Jimmy Walker, *Of Rice and Men*

A Force

“A Force,” composed of 3,000 Australians under command of Brigadier General Arthur Varley, sailed from Keppel Harbour, Singapore, for Burma on 15 May 1942. It was organized as a brigade with three battalions of four companies: Lieutenant-Colonel George Ramsay in command of “Ramsay Force,” Major Charles Green of “Green Force,” and Major D. R. Keer of “Keer Force.”ⁱ Varley would be the highest-ranking officer on the Thailand-Burma railway.

Several men active in musical and theatrical performances in Changi were part of A Force to ensure that the POWs would continue to have entertainment Up Country: Major Jim Jacobs was placed in charge of Signals Company;¹ Norman Whittaker and his 2/18th Infantry Battalion brass band were assigned to Ramsay Force; and the popular female impersonator Jack Turner was part of Green Force.

After five days at sea in their cargo “hell ships,” A Force arrived at Victoria Point on the southern tip of Burma, where Green Force disembarked to start construction of an airfield. Three days later the next group was offloaded at Mergui to increase the capacity of the airfield there. They were joined by members of the British Sumatra Battalion, arriving from Sumatra on another ship. Lieutenant-Colonel Albert Coates, senior surgeon with the 2/10th Australian General Hospital (A.G.H.) in Malaya, was in this group. He would become the senior medical officer (S.M.O.) on the railway.

On 24 May, Ramsay Force disembarked at Tavoy Point. Brigadier General Varley and the remainder of A Force were put ashore at Simbin later that day with orders to proceed to the city of Tavoy. Accommodations at Tavoy were squalid and food scarce. Shortly after their arrival, eight Australian POWs tried to escape, were recaptured, and were executed by firing squad.²

Early Concert Parties

The earliest concert party activity by POWs in Burma took place at Victoria Point and Tavoy. There are no exact dates for the concert parties at Victoria Point nor details about who was responsible for organizing them, but they were held regularly between late May and early August 1942. Tom Morris remembered them as “simple items, performed by individuals” without a stage: “Some of the material was quite lewd and rude.”³

Jack Turner, who performed in these shows, described their meager resources: “We had a violin, which was later sold for food, a clarinet and a guitar plus female attire which we had brought from Singapore.”⁴ Like the musicians who carried their instruments with them Up Country so they could perform when needed, female impersonators felt the same obligation to transport their dresses and other feminine accessories.

ⁱ Keer Force disappears from the record after this first mention.

Enter Jim Jacobs



FIGURE 3.1. MAJOR JIM “HOLE-IN-THE-ROAD” JACOBS.
COURTESY OF KERRIN FREY.

Prior to the war, Jacobs was a member of the Australian Imperial Forces stationed in Malaya. He had been responsible for organizing the A.I.F. Malayan Concert Party that toured Australian forward bases protecting the valuable tin mines and rubber plantations. After capitulation, he re-formed the concert party in Changi POW Camp, Singapore, as part of the 8th Division’s rehabilitation program for their demoralized troops.

During the four months at Tavoy, A Force rebuilt an airfield destroyed in the battle for Burma. When the monsoon rains started falling, the work continued on, increasing the men’s misery.⁵ To maintain morale, Major Jacobs was asked to organize activities to occupy the POWs after their working day was over. “Every night there was something to do,” he recalled. “I had arranged a series of debates and lectures, which were usually held in the open before dark, and after that there was always chess and bridge till lights out.”⁶ What Roy Whitecross remembered most about Jacobs’ efforts were the Sunday night concerts: “everyone who could sing or play took an enthusiastic part.”⁷ During the weeks that followed, the amateur performers exhausted their limited repertoires, so Jacobs organized quiz sessions between competing teams instead.⁸

While at Tavoy, General Varley gave his chief of staff, Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Anderson his own command (“Anderson Force”) that included Jacobs and his Signal Company.

In late September, when the monsoon started to subside, A Force was ordered to Moulmein and then on to Thanbyuzayat.

Initial Construction: October ’42-March ’43

The starting point for the Burma end of the Thailand-Burma railway was Thanbyuzayat/000 Kilo, headquarters for the Japanese 5th Railway Regiment. In contrast to the Thai side of the railway, Thanbyuzayat would be the only base camp in Burma. Administration of the POWs was under the

command of Lieutenant-Colonel Yoshitada Nagatomo (Group III), who maintained his headquarters thirty-five miles away at Moulmein, although Thanbyuzayat was designated as the POW headquarters for Brigadier General Varley.ⁱⁱ

Actual construction on the railway began a short distance away from Thanbyuzayat at Kandaw/004 Kilo on 1 October 1942 by Green Force, which, like the other A.I.F. units, had rejoined A Force after their assignments at Victoria Point and Mergui were finished.⁹ Anderson Force started their work on the railway near Thanbyuzayat on 4 October.

The area around Thanbyuzayat was a level coastal plain of paddy fields, and the POWs found construction work there relatively easy. By the tenth of the month, Anderson Force was transferred to Hlepauk/018 Kilo, where the flat plains began to give way to ridges covered with thick jungle.¹⁰ Until tracks were laid, the POWs were either marched or, as the dirt access road became available, transported by lorries to the construction sites.

While at Hlepauk, Major Jacobs was asked, once again, to generate lectures, debates, or singsongs—anything to help pass the time in the evening.¹¹ USS *Houston* survivor Charles Pryor remembered these attempts: “I think we worked six weeks before we had our first yasumi [sic] day. I know when that first day came, well, some of the guys that had any talent put on a concert; we gathered on a bit of high ground out there and let that be the performing stage. Those that could do anything sang a song or recited a poem or something. We had a Dutchman with us who was a professional magician.ⁱⁱⁱ Of course, he was a good entertainer.”¹² Some of the romusha in a neighboring work camp came over to watch the show, but when the magician performed a trick in which a handkerchief seemingly danced in the air, they made a hasty exit.¹³



FIGURE 3.2. BURMA RAILWAY MAP #1. THANBYUZAYAT/000 KILO—BETETAUNG.

Arrivals from Java

After arriving in Burma from Java on their own hell ships on 30 October, Lieutenant-Colonel Chris Black's "Black Force" of Australians, Dutch, and Americans^{iv} was sent first to Thanbyuzayat and then

ⁱⁱ I.J.A. and POW headquarters were normally in the same camp.

ⁱⁱⁱ This magician was most likely Cortini, who will appear elsewhere in this account of entertainment on the Thailand-Burma railway.

^{iv} These were men of the Texas 131st Field Artillery Regiment or the USS *Houston*.

immediately on to Betetaung/040 Kilo. Betetaung was in the jungle, and here the POWs were expected to clear the trace back toward Hlepauk/018K as well as forward toward the next camp site. Once this was accomplished, they were to build the railway embankment. After the more relaxed atmosphere in “Bicycle Camp,” West Java, where they had previously been imprisoned, this introduction to what their future lives would be like on the railway was disheartening. “The 40 Kilo Camp was almost our undoing,” wrote American POW Tom “Slug” Wright.¹⁴ With intense physical labor, sparse diet, few medical supplies—or the proper medical personnel—many POWs in Betetaung quickly succumbed to a variety of debilitating diseases and infections.

Enter Norman Carter

Among the members of Black Force was Norman Carter who had been an actor/producer in Melbourne, Australia prior to the war. Five weeks before the fall of Singapore, he flew to Malaya to become a scriptwriter composing anti-Japanese propaganda materials for Radio Singapore.¹⁵ Carter was evacuated from Singapore just before it fell: his ship was bombed off Banka Island and he was captured, imprisoned, and eventually transferred to Bicycle Camp in Batavia (Jakarta) in West Java and given a commission as a second lieutenant. There he became producer-director of the Pow-Wow Concert Party.¹⁶

As he observed the POWs at Betetaung struggling to cope with their lot, Carter realized that what the troops needed was some sort of antidote to prevent their minds from brooding on their troubles. “It would be like offering a caraway seed to a starving man,” he wrote, “but something, however trivial, had to be done.”¹⁷

A small pile of railway sleepers (railroad ties) close to the camp gates had possibilities as a stage. But the only performer from the old Pow-Wow Concert Party Carter could locate was the bass-baritone Jim Anderson. There was also a harmonica player in the camp, but Carter was warned that once this performer was on stage he was there to stay. Having no other options, Carter went ahead with these two, planning to flesh out the show with community singing.

In stark contrast to the Bicycle Camp barn he had turned into an impressive indoor proscenium theatre with curtains and lighting, Carter’s first concert party in Burma was performed on a pile of sleepers for a stage, with no lights, no posters publicizing the event, and only two performers. Even then things went awry: Anderson came down with a diphtheria-like illness that swelled his tongue and made it difficult for him to sing, and Carter, who had planned to compère the show, developed identical symptoms and was unable to speak clearly. Thus, the harmonica player was asked to take on this role as well.

From the start Carter sensed that the atmosphere in the audience was not good: “nobody seemed to be keyed up to any great pitch of excitement.” The warning about the harmonica player proved accurate. Not only were his opening remarks lacking in wit, but he played song after song while the audience became increasingly bored and restive. Finally, the camp trumpeter yelled out from the audience, “How’s about for taking it, pal?” and that did the trick. The task of enlivening the audience now fell to Anderson, who scrambled onto the sleepers, but his voice just wasn’t up to it. This was not an auspicious beginning for Carter’s debut as the camp’s entertainment officer. “The Beke Taung concert had laid an egg,” Carter concluded.¹⁸

Enter Wim Kan

On 7 November, more N.E.I. POW laborers for the railway arrived in Rangoon from Java after a harrowing sea voyage. Their ship had been contaminated by the corpses of twelve men who had died of dysentery on the way. Among these troops was the popular Dutch cabaret entertainer Wim Kan. Kan had been on tour with his wife in the Netherlands East Indies when hostilities broke out. Called up by the N.E.I. forces, he became a radio announcer for military news broadcasts. With the N.E.I.'s unconditional surrender, Kan began his imprisonment at Tjimahi POW Camp in West Java. There he met accordionist Nico Rayer, who became his indispensable accompanist in camp cabarets.^v

Upon their arrival in Burma, the N.E.I. POWs were placed in Rangoon Gaol.^{vi}

Jacobs, Carter, and Kan

In contrast to the Thai side of the railway, the story of musical and theatrical activities that occurred in the POW camps in Burma is dominated by these three extraordinary producer-directors. The shows these men produced are not the whole story of entertainment on the Burma side of the railway of course; other producers, musicians, and performers will be noted. But because each of these men published an account of the entertainment he produced and the performers and production staff he gathered around him, those narratives become the major sources for documenting the jungle shows in Burma.

Something Completely Different

By mid-November 1942, Black Force had cleared the railway trace from Betetaung/040 Kilo back to Kun Knit Kway/026 Kilo, where Ramsay Force was now located. Since Colonel Ramsay had seniority over Colonel Black, he became the POW officer in charge of the encampment.

Life in Kun Knit Kway was even more miserable than in Betetaung. Food was inadequate, and the November nights were so cold that without blankets the men couldn't sleep well. Uniforms had deteriorated so badly they were forced to devise G-strings to wear.²⁰ During the day some of the POWs were required by the Japanese engineers to act as "monkey boys," which meant they were "doomed to spend the following twelve hours up to their armpits in swirling icy water, acting as human pile-drivers for a bamboo bridge being built across a broad river two miles up the line."²¹

Once again, Carter decided that "something was urgently needed to make all mens^{vii} forget their aches and pains and secret dreads." But this time it had to be something completely removed from another variety show with "the same old jokes and mouth-organ solos, with the same old tunes and maybe a spot of community singing as a chaser."²² And there had to be something better to perform on than a pile of sleepers. When he approached Colonel Ramsay for permission, Carter used the same rationale he had employed back in Bicycle Camp: "If I may say so, sir, something much more spectacular is needed—something to think about—to plan for and above all to look forward to. A theatre would do that, sir."²³ The appeal had worked in Bicycle Camp; it proved successful at Kun Knit Kway as well.

With a group of volunteer "dirt-shovellers and bamboo-cutters and carriers," Carter set to work building a theatre.²⁴ They devised a shed-like lean-to theatre that had a raised stage with a backdrop and wings of atap matting, and an orchestra pit. Lighting would be provided by two "whopping big bonfires—

^v As a civilian and a Dutch national, Kan's wife, Corrie Vonk, was placed in the Women and Children's Internment Camp at Tjihapit near Bandoeng, where she initiated cabarets to keep up the inhabitants' spirits [see "Corry Vonk" in Ernest Hillen's *The Way of a Boy*].

^{vi} Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Wim Kan's *Burmadagboek* are by Sheri Tromp.

^{vii} Mens is an affectation used by Carter in his memoir. It is his imitation of the Japanese mistaken use of the plural when dealing with the POWs.

one on each side of the stage, but not too close,” Carter cautioned, “lest a spark turned the theatre into a third bonfire.”²⁵

The problem, of course, was what to put on the stage. Carter believed it should be a play—a farce—with characters and a plot to stimulate the men’s imaginations and emotions.²⁶ Before he could work out the solution, he came down with fibrositis, caused by all the backbreaking effort to get the theatre built, and missed the planning sessions as well as the performance.

Carter’s instincts about the presence of a theatre structure to generate excitement proved correct. Before the show started, there was “an enormous semi-circle of men, some in G-strings, some in tattered shorts, squatting with their knees up, gazing raptly at the stage.”²⁷ When 7:30 arrived and the harmonica player jumped into the orchestra pit, there was an almost audible groan from the audience, who remembered his last appearance. This time he surprised them:

With a flourish worthy of a Guards drum major the orchestra blew a fortissimo chord, the players ran on, and went into a breezy opening chorus. The show went over well, largely owing to the excellent clowning of producer-comedian Johnny Jevons, who appeared to have a first-rate fund of material. His first gag brought a roar of approval:

“What’s the difference between a nip from a dog and a nip from a Nip? Well, the dog gets his thrashing right away, but the Nip’s got to wait for his!”

When the cast had taken their final bows, the mouth-organist who had proved himself to be an excellent accompanist, stood up, and got a resounding ovation.²⁸

Unlike at Betetaung, the first show at Kun Knit Kway was a success. Buoyed by that triumph, Jevons made immediate plans to produce another show the following Sunday. But Carter was dubious about this amateur’s ability to sustain his efforts—and he was right. To flesh out his new show, Jevons repeated jokes he had told in his first show and fell back on community singing, which did not go over well with the exhausted troops, “Roll Out the Barrel” being a particularly unfortunate choice.²⁹ With the failure of his second show, the dejected Johnny Jevons “retired” from the stage.

This loss of entertainment upset “the Castle” (Colonel Ramsay and the POW camp administration): “Not that the residents were particularly theatre-minded,” observed Carter, “but they recognised the urgency for some form of escapism for the men . . . and the sole amenity was the lonely little bamboo theatre, with no shows to put in it.”³⁰ As a stopgap measure, junior officers put on a *mock trial*, an old army barracks entertainment in which troops were allowed to poke fun at their leaders, regulations, and camp life. From Carter’s point of view, “Jokes about rice and the ‘runs’ had long since ceased to be funny, and, from the psychological angle, the fact that there were ‘mock prisoners’ on stage killed the show from the start.”³¹

While recovering from his muscle strain, Carter was encouraged to think about how the apparent lack of entertainment for the upcoming Christmas holidays could be resolved. Enlisting the “retired” Johnny Jevons’ help, he started writing a farce, *The Sultan of Sarong*, “a comedy of concubines set in the Sultan’s lecherous lounge of lust!”³²

Other Places—Other Faces

By early December, other camps were trying different types of entertainment to keep their men's attention diverted from their ills. At Tanyin/035 Kilo a talent contest was put on with some unusual participants: "Even the Nipponese faced the judging panel," wrote Lieutenant-Colonel John Williams in his diary. "They sang in both languages, their own and English. The show went on for 2½ hours."³³ Williams was the officer in charge of "Williams Force," a new group that had arrived in Burma from Java and was composed of the Australian 2/2 Pioneer Battalion and sailors who had survived the sinking of the HMAS *Perth*.

Down the line at Thetkaw/014 Kilo, a choral group under the direction of Sergeant Norman Halliday had developed. Tom Morris, who joined the choir, remembered that one of their contributions to a camp concert was a selection of Negro slave spirituals.³⁴

The Bob Skilton & Les Bullock Show

With its relative stability of personnel and work requirements, entertainment in the base camp at Thanbyuzayat had the opportunity to develop beyond impromptu sing-alongs or simple variety shows. A concert party organized by Sergeant Bob Skilton, a well-known Australian vocalist, and British Sergeant Les Bullock began to produce weekly variety shows on an outdoor platform stage built on the edge of the parade ground. (Besides his role as entertainer, Bullock also operated the outfit's "dicky bird" [secret radio], sometimes with Skilton acting as his assistant.) Rohan Rivett remembered their comic "patter" acts as both witty and wickedly salacious.³⁵ A reluctant Sid "Happy" Marshall was persuaded to appear as a female impersonator in the shows. "These performances were truly burlesque in which I sang in my natural voice (baritone) wearing a sarong," Marshall wrote. "This gave me some notoriety I did not seek."^{viii36}

Wim Kan's First Cabaret in Burma

Miles away in Rangoon Gaol, Wim Kan gave his first cabaret in Burma. St. Nicholas Day, 5 December, was the most important Dutch Christmas holiday, but the Japanese had refused permission for a cabaret on that date, so Kan performed it surreptitiously on 6 December instead. With the men crowded around a single oil lamp, Kan opened the show with some humorous theatre anecdotes as well as the song "Ganzenbord, 1942," his parody of the old children's board game "The Goose Game," with topical references to the swiftness with which the Japanese had taken their "spaces" in Southeast Asia.³⁷

"Ganzenbord, 1942" reveals Kan's method of generating his cabaret material. Borrowing the tune of a well-known song, he rewrote the lyrics to critique current social or political conditions, hoping to change the listeners' attitudes and behavior. Back in Tjimahi POW Camp in West Java, he had used Kurt Weill's music for "Mack the Knife" as the basis for "Song of the Food Grabbers" in an attempt to shame the perpetrators into stopping their actions.^{ix}

Christmas in Captivity

The Christmas holidays, extending from 25 December through to New Year's Day, were always a special time in the military. In most camps, the Japanese acknowledged the importance of these holidays and gave the prisoners extra time off and permission for entertainment. Christmas 1942 would be their

viii We will hear more of Marshall when he is recuperating in Tamarkan Relocation Camp in Thailand.

ix See "The FEPOW Songbook" for the lyrics.

first as prisoners of war. For many of the young troops it would be their first Christmas away from home.³⁸

A Brass Band Tour

To ensure that each camp had some sort of Christmas entertainment, Sergeant Norman Whittaker and his brass band at Thetkaw/014 Kilo were given permission to tour each of the work camps on Christmas Day “to give a short programme.” They had even been allowed time to practice for the tour after their workday was over.³⁹ Traveling by lorry, they first went to the present railhead at Tanyin/035 Kilo, where they performed on Christmas Eve for Williams Force. “It was good to hear a band again,” wrote E. R. Hall. “About 50 Nipponese and 80 Burmese listened as well.”⁴⁰

After spending the night, they left early on Christmas Day, doubling back down the line to Kun Knit Kway/026 Kilo. One number played there was the old marching favorite, “Colonel Bogey,” which gave the POWs a good laugh because of the alternative lyrics that mocked all military authority:

Bollocks! Was all the band could play.

Bollocks! They played it night and day.

Bollocks! Ta-ra-ra Bollocks!

*Ta-ra-ra bollocks! Bollocks! Bollocks!*⁴¹

In the present context, this was an act of resistance against their captors.

Later that day, at Hlepauk/018 Kilo, Jacobs listened as the band “put on a splendid programme which made us forget for a short time that we were prisoners of war. At the conclusion of the performance some wag called out, ‘Come again next year.’ This raised a good laugh, as most of us expected to be home before Christmas 1943.”⁴²

At Thetkaw/014 (their home camp), Tom Morris remembered the concert vividly: “Norm Whittaker. Marvelous on the trumpet, absolutely. I can still hear the triple tonguing on his trumpet.”⁴³ Their final concert took place at Thanbyuzayat, where Lieutenant Naito, the camp commandant, arrived late—and drunk—and demanded a repeat of the concert, which made everyone extremely unhappy.

Bullock & Skilton’s *Cinderella*

As their Christmas offering at Thanbyuzayat, Skilton and Bullock collaborated on producing the old pantomime favorite *Cinderella*. The performance of a pantomime during the Christmas holidays was an old and honored tradition in the British Empire. This distinctive British theatrical form held a unique place in the hearts of Australian and British POWs, as some of their earliest and fondest childhood memories were of having been taken to Christmas “pantos” by parents and grandparents. With their clear conflict between Good and Evil, their outrageous dames, slapstick and slosh scenes, fantasy, transformations, music, dancing, and audience participation (“It’s behind you!”), the pantos performed by the POWs produced a powerful nostalgia for family and home and happier times. As an antidote, the comedians’ topical humor, double entendres, and covert jabs at their Japanese captors kept the prisoners solidly grounded in their

^x During the war in Europe the soldiers there sang their own version of this marching song, which went: “Hitler only had one ball/Goering had two, but very small/Himmler had something sim’lar/but Goebbels had no balls at all.”

present world as they fell about with laughter.

Cinderella would become one of the most popular pantomimes performed by the POWs on the Thailand-Burma railway. Its story of a poor girl “captive” to her stepsisters’ every desire^{xi} and her eventual release from that servitude by a fairy godmother and a prince carried tremendous metaphorical significance for the POWs. According to Rohan Rivett, Skilton and Bullock’s version of *Cinderella* was not long on metaphor but over the top in ribaldry.⁴⁴

Carter & Jevons’ *The Sultan of Sarong*

Back up the line at Kun Knit Kway, Carter and Jevons’ *The Sultan of Sarong* opened “to a packed house.” Jim Anderson played Abdul the Bull Bull, a salacious sultan;^{xii} Val Ballantyne, Egbert, his eunuch-in-chief; an unknown female impersonator played Connie, a cute concubine; others, ladies of the harem. The plot concerned the sultan’s troubles with Egbert, who was always telling the harem ladies racy stories, which undercut the sultan’s pleasure in doing so. But the sultan couldn’t dismiss Egbert because he was too skillful in finding new women for the harem. One night, after a particularly annoying incident, the sultan has Egbert beaten. When Egbert returns to the harem, he angrily wishes aloud that he were sultan. One of the concubines tells him that if he prays to Venus, his wish will come true. He does so, and Abdul runs onstage, “flings himself at Egbert’s feet and in a lilting soprano trills: ‘You called, Master?’”

Egbert, now gravel-voiced, snarls: “Where have you been, you perishing pansy? The ladies are waiting for you to tell ’em some juicy stories! Get cracking!”

Abdul rises, stands with one hand on his hip and simpers: “Master, no can tell naughty stories.”

“Why?” growls Egbert.

“I’m too shy!” *Curtain.*

The humor in *The Sultan of Sarong* may have been sophomoric, but it provided the release of laughter the POWs needed so badly.

After the performance, Carter and Jevons were informed of some grave concerns voiced by “the Castle” about the show’s bawdiness. Colonel Ramsay was one of those commanding officers who strictly adhered to the army’s guidelines for camp entertainments, condemning coarse speech and behavior in public events. Buoyed by their success, Carter and Jevons ignored these warnings. The following night they had a script conference and quickly wrote a “sizzling” farce, *Radiosities*—a takeoff on a day of programming at a commercial radio broadcasting station—for their next offering. But before it could be produced, Black and Green Forces were leapfrogged up the line to Meiloe/075 Kilo.⁴⁵

^{xi} The stepmother doesn’t always appear in the traditional British pantomime version of the fairy tale.

^{xii} “Abdul Abulbul Amir” was a popular song during the Crimean War. Besides the original lyrics, there was a salacious version sung by British soldiers.

1943

New Year's Celebrations

Just before Christmas, Wim Kan and his fledging cabaret troupe had been moved from Rangoon Gaol to a hospital in the N.E.I. POW headquarters compound at Moulmein. There Kan was reunited with his close friend Cor Punt, the N.E.I. adjutant, who joined his troupe as a vocalist. His preparations for a Christmas cabaret came to a sudden halt when his accompanist, Nico Rayer, became ill. The performance had to wait until New Year's Eve, after Rayer had recovered.⁴⁶

"Letter to My Son on Christmas Eve '42"

While still in Rangoon Gaol, Kan had written, *Brief ann m'n zoon op kerstavond '42* ("Letter to My Son on Christmas Eve '42") to undercut any self-pity the POWs might be feeling about their plight. Kan knew the power of sentimentality to mask the truth. He took a very sentimental subject (an absent father's letter to his son) and then proceeded to remove the mask. Lyrics for the opening verse and closing refrain give a taste of the longer piece.^{xiii}

*Dear son, I write to you in my mind
This Christmas letter that you will never receive.
Do you remember how we laughed about the snowman
That hangs on your Christmas tree tonight?
Do you recall that you grabbed my hand
At the sight of the shining tree?
How I explained to you this festival of Peace on Earth
While you listened with open mouth?*

*

*Now your daddy with his "peace on earth"
And his goody-goody Christmas story from back then
Is hopelessly stuck in Mother Earth's muck.
What can a human being do about this world?
I hope—my son—that when you have grown up
And you sing for your son a Christmas song
About peace, tolerance and reason,
It does not sound like an "accusation."⁴⁷*

The song's hard-hitting ironic tone was typical of Kan—even in a Christmas show, with all its

^{xiii} See "The FEPOW Songbook" for the full text.

attendant heavy emotional baggage, where the main purpose must have been to cheer up the troops. In the complete lyrics, Kan even dares to suggest that their own willingness in the past to tell lies and promote illusions about their world had, perhaps, led them to this place. It was a challenging assertion and, as we shall see, not at all an unusual stance for Wim Kan to take.

With the cabaret's success, Kan sought permission for his troupe to perform weekly. Pleased with the positive effect on the POWs' morale, the Japanese commandant granted his request. As a New Year's surprise, N.E.I. headquarters gave Kan an honorary commission with the rank of second lieutenant.⁴⁸

Meanwhile, up on the railway, most camps celebrated the New Year with campfire sing-alongs. "As the hours of night drifted in," wrote Leslie Hall at Tanyin/035 Kilo, "so did the voices of the camp artists in song and revelry. The whole camp, even many of the sick, joined in the lyrics with memories of home and happiness."⁴⁹

"It's a Jap Slap Happy Day"

In early January, Anderson Force joined Williams Force at Tanyin. By 14 January, the Japanese engineers, trying to push the railway project forward, had increased their daily task load significantly, and now the POWs had only one day off in ten, which meant they were not only returning late to camp every day but growing more and more exhausted. In response, Jacobs redoubled his efforts to provide entertainment on their yasume days. One of his new variety show performers was "Poodles" Norley, who had been a petty officer on the *Perth*. This was Norley's first appearance as a female impersonator since Java. Afterward, in appreciation for the performance, the Japanese gave the performers presents of cigars and fruit.⁵⁰

So their acceptance of the presents wouldn't be misconstrued as collaboration, their next show included a parody of the song "Hap, Hap, Happy Day" that made fun of the corporal punishment the POWs endured for the slightest infraction of camp rules.

It's a Jap, slap, happy day

If you don't kiostke (Attention!),

You get the boot

If you don't salute,

It's a Jap slap happy day.⁵¹

Needless to say, the lyrics did not go over well with the Japanese. This time there were no gifts of cigars and fruit. And, as a further consequence, no lectures or concerts could be given without the Japanese commandant's permission regarding their content.⁵²

Wim Kan Makes His Mark

After the first of the year, the N.E.I. POW headquarters was moved from Moulmein to Thanbyuzayat, and there, on 11 January, Kan's cabaret troupe performed the camp's first Dutch/Indonesian entertainment on the outdoor stage. Kan found it difficult to project his opening section of songs and patter loudly enough for all in the large gathering to hear. The rest of the program was, as usual, a mixture of instrumental turns, songs, and sketches. Two days later a piano for Kan and his troupe arrived as a present from the Japanese

commandant, along with a “request” for a private performance in the commandant’s quarters. Aware of the ironies of the situation, Kan wrote about this command performance in his diary:

Late yesterday night we played music for the Japanese Camp Commander, a very kind man in a white sweater. He sat smiling on the table. He himself played the violin. Two candles were on the piano. There we were, playing so peacefully in the heart of Burma as if there was no war, as if there were no runaway POWs that would be executed!⁵³

As in all POW camps, the different nationalities at Thanbyuzayat had separate administrative, housing, messing, and hospital areas—but there was only the one stage. Relationships between the N.E.I. and the British or Australians on the railway were not always the most agreeable; in fact, they were frequently quite hostile. The language barrier was one major obstacle to better understanding. Although a number of Dutch/Indonesian troops understood English, few of the Brits or Aussies understood Dutch. For this reason, two separate entertainment units had to share the stage in Thanbyuzayat instead of combining their talents into one. Other cultural difficulties were also an issue, one of which was race. Most of the N.E.I. other ranks were *indische jorgens* (mixed race) or fully Indonesian, which disturbed many of the white British and Australian troops.

On 16 January, there was an attempt to bridge this linguistic, cultural, and racial divide. As new arrivals, Kan’s cabaret troupe was asked to perform in a talent contest as part of a Skilton and Bullock variety show entitled “The Cabaret of the Unknown” that would introduce them to the British and Australian audiences. One hundred cigars would be awarded to the contest winner. In competition were De Haan and De Leeuwentemmer, who performed a four-hand piano selection; Rayer, with a harmonica solo; and Erik Noggerath, who offered violin selections.^{xiv} Kan did not participate—his English was not good enough. He thought the show’s title apt; it was amateurish and poorly performed.⁵⁴ His troupe would demonstrate professional standards when their turn came at the end of the month.

Kan Sets the Standard

On 31 January, Kan’s cabaret troupe performed for another huge audience of N.E.I. personnel, this time in honor of Princess Beatrix’s birthday. His troupe had now grown to eight performers.^{xv} One of these was an Australian vocalist named Pat Levy, who had originally been engaged to teach Kan conversational English so he could eventually perform for the whole camp. Kan sang four of his own compositions in the show, one of which was the new song *Bezoek aan Burma in 1950* (“Visit to Burma in 1950”).

“Visit to Burma in 1950”

The subject matter was, as usual, provocative: an imagined time in the future—1950—when Kan, as a former FEPOW, brings his wife on a tour to the sites in Burma where he had labored as a captive.^{xvi} Their rail journey is marred by a series of mishaps:

^{xiv} The contest winner(s) is not known.

^{xv} These were Stokvis (comedian), Wacano (guitar), van Bennekom (harmonica), Erik Noggerath (violin), Nic Rayer and van Heusden (accordions), and Cor Punt and Pat Levy (vocalists).

^{xvi} This aspect of the song proved prophetic: many POWs did return to Burma and Thailand as tourists in later years.

"The train is going too fast!"
My wife comments angrily, turning pale
"Your track does not seem up to par."
I scream over the thunder of the train:
"It would be a miracle if I did something good in your eyes."
She yells: "Shut your big mouth!"
And before I can see precisely what is happening,
The whole dining coach topples over.
But when I angrily inquire
Where the construction fault lies,
I recognize the little bridge as my own work.

My wife is in a foul mood: she calls me a jerk.
She says: "You always do a half-assed job."
When I chat with the chef at Retpu^{xvii}
I find out that my railway line
Goes straight to China.
I then ask him how was it possible to miss Bangkok?
"It is a little matter of a mistake" he calmly replies.
"They worked from two sides—that went very well—
Only they did not meet; too bad."
My wife said: "Let's go back to Rembrandt Square^{xviii}
You are too unimportant for work on such a line."^{xix}

Though the song sounds critical of the POWs' construction work, Kan's actual purpose was quite different. Like the Danish writer Piet Hein and his "grooks" (short poems penned during the German occupation of Denmark), Kan had written his song in such a way that its interpretation depended on who was hearing it. The Japanese could understand it as critical of the POWs' work; the POW audience, on the other hand, could hear it as encouraging their efforts at sabotage.

The show ended with a moment of silence in remembrance of the fallen. Then Major Hazenberg gave a short speech which concluded with everyone singing two verses of the national anthem, "*het Wilhelmus*." Following standard practice, the cabaret was repeated in the N.E.I. hospital ward a few days later.⁵⁶

^{xvii} A work camp in the jungle, up the railway at 30 Kilo.

^{xviii} A central square in Amsterdam.

^{xix} See "*The FEPOW Songbook*" for the full text.

“The All New Stage”

Among the miscellaneous items Kan entered in his diary on 18 February was a passing note that he was suffering from a small infected leg wound, that his rehearsal and performance schedule had been approved by the Japanese, and that there was a new theatre under construction. “Everybody full of energy busy with building a new stage,” he wrote. “Stealing pieces of wood etc. from the Jap (as he had his eyes diverted elsewhere), making a parquet floor to surprise me. Really nice.”⁵⁷

Two days later, his cabaret opened this new theatre with a performance he claimed was “a roaring success”:

Inaugurated the all new stage. Totally built with stolen materials. Parquet flooring, 2 big flower vases with shrubs, curved front steps, white painted balustrade, 2 oil light containers, all in all exactly like a chic little stage on a terrace of some big restaurant on the Riviera! There was even a music stand.

In a provocative gesture that must have delighted his POW audience, the first item in the cabaret was a contest: “How many pieces of wood are on the stage? Answer 468! (Someone guessed 469).” If the Japanese authorities caught on to what this contest was all about, they didn’t say so at the time. What they did do, however, at evening *tenko* (roll call) was issue an order that “it was forbidden to remove even one little piece of wood [from the Japanese area]. Severe punishment!”⁵⁸

The new stage now became the venue where Skilton and Bullock presented their weekly variety shows as well, and Kan believed the competition provided by his professional cabarets made their efforts much better. Thanks to Pat Levy, his conversational English improved to the point that he began to perform in all the hospital wards and not just for the N.E.I. troops.⁵⁹

Following his first cabaret in March, Kan’s health began to deteriorate. The infected wound on his leg had not healed, and with limited quantities of soap and water available for washing up, he developed a rash all over his body. By 19 March he had five sores on his leg and was ordered to take three days’ bed rest. Refusing to disappoint the troops, he went ahead with a new cabaret on 20 March.⁶⁰

Horsing Around

Before Ramsay Force joined Black and Green Forces at Meiloe/075 Kilo, the POWs demanded that a new type of entertainment take place at Kun Knit Kway. This was a “race meeting” celebrating their national holiday, “Melbourne Cup Day.”^{xx} Though the actual date for the holiday was nine months away, the prisoners tackled its re-creation with alacrity. Wooden hobby horses were constructed for the riders, and sarongs and fancy dress material originally purchased in Singapore for wives and sweethearts back home were used to create the jockey’s blouses and caps. There was a totalizator board made out of bamboo and web belts and “windows” where the POWs could place their bets. And, of course, there had to be bookie stands. Everyone donned homemade costumes for the occasion. There were men in frock coats and “ladies” in fancy dresses—even Colonel Ramsay attended as “Governor” with a “Governor’s Lady” on his arm.⁶¹

Following the race day event, Ramsay Force joined Black and Green Forces at Meiloe/075 Kilo, bringing the camp size to approximately 3,000 men. The only positive result of this severe overcrowding

^{xx} The Melbourne Cup was traditionally held on the first Tuesday in November.

was, in Tom Morris' mind, "a much wider range of skills and talents" for concert parties.⁶² Once again, because of his seniority in rank, Colonel Ramsay was appointed officer in charge.



FIGURE 3.3. BURMA RAILWAY MAP #2. BETETAUNG—MEILOE.

Carter looked at the site of their new camp, "built on the slop of a precipitous hill, the commencement of a range of mountains which grew progressively higher and more savagely rugged," with foreboding.⁶³ On the positive side was "an excellent little theatre" left by the British POWs who had been in the camp earlier.^{xxi} "This was no makeshift lean-to like the modest edifice in Kun Knit Kway," Carter observed. "It had a proper roof^{xxii} with reasonable height, plenty of room on stage and off, and there it stood just begging to be used."⁶⁴

"The Speedo" Begins

It was at Meiloe that the POWs first heard the news that the deadline for completion of the railway had been moved up to October. And they soon learned what this new "Speedo" meant in changed tactics and treatment. "The pressure was put on and blitzing became severe, sick men being forced to work," wrote Jack Turner. "We were hard at work at daylight and for several weeks worked until 2 and 3 a.m. under the light of fires. . . . Many more bashings were dealt out to us by both guards and engineers. Men came home from work in the early hours of the morning dead beat."⁶⁵ It was time for Carter to produce another show.

Given the increased pressure on the POWs' time and strength, Carter didn't know if he could generate the energy or the personnel necessary to put up another show. The only possibility he had on hand was *Radiosities*, which he and Jevons had written back in Kun Knit Kway following the success of *The Sultan of Sarong*. He knew this script was "a Madras curry, a trifle too hot for some palates," but rationalized that the POWs were now so sex starved they would be ready for it. The success of *The Sultan of Sarong* erased any official concerns about lewdness from his mind. When word circulated that he might produce another show, the prospect energized the camp, and many POWs volunteered to construct and paint the scenery and act as stagehands. Encouraged by this obvious hunger for entertainment, Carter put *Radiosities* into rehearsal.⁶⁶

^{xxi} Who these POWs were is not known, as no records of an earlier group at Meiloe have been found.

^{xxii} Carter means a pitched roof, which allowed for a full proscenium arch concealing offstage spaces on either side, rather than an open lean-to shed roof.

Three Entertainment Casualties

The POWs back at Thanbyuzayat were also affected by “the Speedo”—but indirectly. Shortly after it got under way, the base camp was turned into a general hospital for the heavy sick who began to arrive in increasing numbers from their work camps up the line. By the end of March, Kan, too, was in hospital. His infected leg had become badly swollen and covered in sores; his cabaret activity suspended.⁶⁷

By early April, Williams Force and Anderson Force (including Jacobs’ Signals Company) had been combined into “Mobile Force No. 1.” This new unit would lay the sleepers and rails from Kun Knit Kway/o26 Kilo to the point where they would join those advancing from the Thai side.^{xxiii} This exhausting, backbreaking work would take seven long months to complete. For Jacobs, there would be no energy or opportunity to produce further entertainment until the railway was completed.⁶⁸

Meanwhile, Carter’s band of enthusiastic volunteers had accomplished wonders in preparation for the opening of their new show at Meiloe. Over the course of three consecutive Sundays, “they built an excellent copy of a broadcasting studio complete with the announcer’s desk and microphone (split bamboo); two sets of turntables which actually revolved . . . and a pile of records (thin disks of dried mud).” Carter hoped the show would “make people forget Meiloe and imagine themselves back home listening to their favourite radio station.”⁶⁹

Radiosities

It had taken four weeks, but *Radiosities* was now ready for its matinee opening. When the curtains parted, the set “got a big and well-deserved hand.” The atop backdrop “had been whitewashed (lime for latrine pits) and on it was drawn (charcoal from the cookhouse) a control panel complete with knobs and gadgets. In the centre of the studio stood a pedestal mike (bamboo).”

“Sunrise Sam,” the early-morning announcer, also got a hand “when he walked in, sat at his desk, opened the mike and said brightly: ‘Good morning one and all. Six-thirty at your favourite station 2MO Meiloe,’ then put on a record which actually spun” (a POW squatting underneath the table turned it with a handle). But from there on things went from bad to worse. Sunrise Sam’s jokes about cures for marital infidelity put a distinct chill in the air. And by the time Aunt Daisy in the “Children’s Storytime” segment told the story of “Little Coldie Cock and the Three Beers,” the audience’s reaction was, according to Carter, “polar.”⁷⁰

Radiosities proved to be a disaster. Carter had misjudged his audience. Under the watchful eye of Colonel Ramsay, the men weren’t about to laugh at the scatological obscenities. And most of the POWs had long since buried any thoughts about sex in their need to satisfy constant hunger, so jokes about marital infidelity back home—their worst fears—were totally out of place. Carter was to pay dearly for these miscalculations. Colonel Ramsay banished him from the camp and ordered him to join the heavy sick being taken by lorry down to Thanbyuzayat the next morning. “Six jolty hours later,” he wrote, “the truck drove past the guardhouse at Thanbuzayat [*sic*]. The Bad Boy of Meiloe was back at base in disgrace.”⁷¹

Though Norman Carter and Wim Kan were now in the same camp, they never met. Kan’s continued hospitalization with leg ulcers meant there were no performances by his cabaret troupe for several weeks. During their absence from the stage, an unusual event took place: a musical concert presented by a touring Japanese military band. Little is known about this group or its program of music, but its appearance was noted at various sites on both sides of the railway.

^{xxiii} A British and American party had laid the rails from Thanbyuzayat to Kun Knit Kway.

Skilton & Bullock Soldier On

Skilton and Bullock's variety shows continued—now seen by Norman Carter. One of their favorite targets for send-ups were medical personnel and medical practices. Recovering POWs dreaded being sent back up the line to construction camps where “the Speedo” was in full force and would do anything to avoid it. Achieving a medical officer's permission to stay in camp under false premises was known as “tossing the doctor.” In one show they presented a skit with this title which employed a parody of the Christmas song “Jingle Bells.” Carter, delighted by its audacity, copied down the entire skit:

Said Les “How you feeling, Bob?”
 “Fighting fit!”
 “You look it! I got the drum you nearly got sent up the line last week.”
 “That's right. But I'm still here, chum.”
 “Put it across the doctor, eh?”
 “And how! ‘Listen, Doc,’ I said. ‘I'm sick. If you send me up the line I'm cert for the cemetery, cos . . .

*I'm feelin' awful queer,
 With pains from there to here!
 Me liver's up to putt.
 I got a twisted gut.
 Me bowels is epileptic,
 Both kidney's [sic] have gone septic,
 I've a goitre on me spine,
 Ooooooh don't send me up the line . . . Cos . . .
 Jungle bells, jungle bells —
 They haunt me night and day.
 Can't you hear 'em ringing
 In the ooloo^{xxiv} far away . . . Oooh . . .
 Jungle bells, Jungle bells,
 Lots of woe and strife,
 But if you can toss the doctor,
 You can stay at base for life!*

“Come on now, fellers, all together, let it rip”—and the delighted audience roared the chorus.⁷²

With the duplicitous practice now publicly unmasked, the POW authorities could no longer turn a

^{xxiv} Malayan term for “jungle.”

blind eye to its prevalence. If the Japanese discovered what the skit was really about, there would be serious repercussions for all the prisoners.

In Honor of the Emperor's Birthday

Back at Meiloe/075 Kilo, the entertainment, now purged of the obscene and corrupting influence of Norman Carter, carried on. With the arrival of Ramsay Force, Carter's abandoned performers took advantage of Norman Whittaker and his brass band to put up a musical comedy, *The Poor Little Mill Girl*, in which Jack Turner took the female lead.^{xxv} They could hardly have predicted the consequences of its successful performance on 25 April. Impressed with the show, their Japanese commandant decided it should be featured in a propaganda film being shot at Thanbyuzayat on 29 April in honor of the emperor's birthday. And so the sets, costumes, and company—Whittaker and his band included—were transported by truck all the way back down the line to Thanbyuzayat.⁷³

A Propaganda Film

At Thanbyuzayat, Lieutenant-Colonel Nagatomo believed he had engineered a public relations coup. A Japanese film crew would make a film about life in his Group III base camp at Thanbyuzayat as they celebrated the emperor's birthday. Its climax would be the hastily arranged musical comedy performance by the Meiloe POWs.

Still in hospital, Wim Kan wrote down a synopsis of every rumor he heard concerning the filming about to take place: "The Japs are going to make a propaganda film: how they treat their Prisoners of War. Arrival at the station (with stretchers, doctors, etc.), meeting, kitchen, *toko* [supply store] and music performance."^{xxvi} He couldn't help making a sarcastic comment on the new theatre being built for the performance of *The Poor Little Mill Girl*. "Oh, we fare so well! All of a sudden a beautiful stage is built. Before you could not get anything, and now a magnificent stage in one day!"⁷⁴ This "magnificent stage" was a large atap proscenium stagehouse with a pitched roof and electric lighting.

The POWs at Thanbyuzayat did not want to be cast in a propaganda film, but Brigadier General Varley, fearing reprisals would be taken out on the troops up the line if they didn't comply, ordered them to fully cooperate. But their compliance, according to Jack Turner, included clever attempts to subvert the film's propaganda value: "[O]ur authorities worked things so that one man was at each place they filmed. In other words, the same man that was filmed at the canteen was also filmed in bed as a patient, in the concert party, and also being operated on, so I imagine that the propaganda film would not have such effect on the people back home."⁷⁵

Filming during the day had gone well—at least up to the point where the POWs were supposed to sing the old drinking song "Bless Them All" as they marched toward the camera. As instructed, they gave it all they had—but with a twist:

Screw 'em all, screw 'em all.

The long and the short and the tall.

Screw all the guards and each bow-legged Jap,

^{xxv} No prewar precursor for this musical has been located. It may have been the POWs' version of the popular 1936 film *Poor Little Rich Girl*, starring Shirley Temple. If so, the song from that film, "I Love a Military Man," must have brought down the house.

^{xxvi} The script for this film is almost identical to another propaganda film, *Calling Australia*, made by the Japanese on Java. It, too, ends with scenes from a POW musical.

*Screw all the cooks and their flaming rice pap.
 When we're going away from it all,
 And there's no guards to screech and to bawl,
 They can stuff their pick axes,
 Right fair up their jacksies!
 So cheer up me lads, screw 'em all!*⁷⁶

Carter claimed that when the song's translation was reported to the Japanese film director, he fainted. Colonel Nagatomo was furious. To prevent any further possible loss of face, he announced that the concert would go on as planned but would not be filmed. It was just as well. Jack Turner, the star of the show, had come down with another bout of malaria and barely managed to get through his performance. He was admitted to the hospital immediately afterward with a temperature of 104 degrees.⁷⁷

The other performers were seemingly not in good shape either: Nagatomo's promise of rice cakes and soft drinks for their participation had led them to wildly inflate their performing capabilities.⁷⁸ As a member of the audience, Able-Seaman Arthur Bancroft^{xxvii} described the continuing "larrikin" behavior on the part of his Australian mates:

At one period the compère requested everyone to be upstanding whilst the band blared out a song in honour of our honourable hosts. Everyone was upstanding including the Brigadier and other officers. Seeing the Australian officers standing to attention, all the Japanese officers present sprang to attention with all the pomp and splendour of the army to which they belong. The band struck up the tune of "Colonel Bogey" to the accompaniment of hundreds of lusty-voiced prisoners singing well-known words. The ceremony ended up with the entire cast and audience singing "Auld Lang Syne" which is a great favourite with the Japs. Again the words of the song were displaced by more fitting words.⁷⁹

Though none too happy about it, Carter had been ordered by Brigadier Varley to compère the concert. From his perspective, the show had been "an abysmal flop."⁸⁰ But were the performers really that bad? Or had the Australians' antics been part of their plan to sabotage the performance as well? Needless to say, Nagatomo was not amused and the entertainers did not receive their promised treats.⁸¹

Elsewhere in Thanbyuzayat, Wim Kan would not recover sufficiently to perform again until the end of May. When he did, his cabaret included a new type of comic skit: blackouts, which required electrical lighting to be effective.⁸⁸ Once the Japanese film crew was off the scene, the POWs commandeered the "magnificent stage."

^{xxvii} Bancroft had been on the H.M.A.S. Perth when it was sunk by the Japanese.

Sergeant Fox Saves the Day

Elsewhere, other celebrations were hastily arranged for the emperor's birthday as well. At Anankwin/045 Kilo, Eric Burgoyne of the British Sumatra Battalion found himself ordered by the Japanese commandant to mount a show in honor of the occasion—the following evening! He panicked. He knew that Major Jacobs, who had arrived with Mobile Force No. 1 five days earlier, was too exhausted to produce a concert,⁸² so Burgoyne sent out urgent inquiries requesting anyone in the camp with entertainment experience to come forward. Sergeant Pat Fox, who had previously organized impromptu shows for his army unit prior to captivity, turned up at Burgoyne's office to volunteer for the job. The Japanese had agreed to cooperate fully with the preparations, so while Fox went off to scout out and audition potential performers, Burgoyne had the task of building a makeshift stage.⁸³

By the next morning all the performers, props, costuming, and staging materials had been collected. The three volunteer female impersonators—"dubbed the perverts"⁸⁴—had their entire facial and body hair shaved off in readiness for their debut that night: they would wear sarongs and wigs made from flayed and dyed rope. The Japanese had done their part as promised, loaning the POWs rattan screens to be used as front curtains as well as white sheets, hurricane lamps, and a table for a shadow play.

At 7:30, the show opened with a lively sing-along parody of "She'll be Coming Round the Mountain."

*They'll be dropping thousand pounders
When they come!
They'll be dropping thousand pounders
When they come!
They'll be laying hard-boiled eggs
Around the yellow bastards' legs.
'Cos they'll be dropping thousand pounders
When they come!*⁸⁵

This response to being ordered to perform in honor of the emperor's birthday was risky business. But the Japanese, apparently not understanding the words, clapped to the beat.

The shadow play was an old chestnut of vaudeville theatre: "a medical inspection at which a line of men had the stethoscope applied to most unlikely parts until one was found to need surgery. He was then tapped on the head, carted behind the illuminated bed sheets, put on the operating table and opened up. All kinds of objects including the inevitable string of sausages were seemingly extracted from his stomach."⁸⁶

The hit of the show, especially, it appears, for the Japanese, was the final act, "which featured a lewd portrayal of our three ladies grappling with slipped bosoms and the over-boisterous advances of their lecherous suitors." In closing, everyone sang "Auld Lang Syne," including the Japanese in their own language.⁸⁷ The celebration was a success. Sergeant Pat Fox had saved the day.^{xxviii}

^{xxviii} We will hear more about Sergeant Pat Fox when he is in the convalescent camp at Tamarkan, Thailand, at the beginning of 1944.

“Speedo” Miseries

Cholera Outbreak. In May, Mobile Force No. 1 laid rail from Anankwin/045 Kilo to Taungzun/060 Kilo, a camp recently vacated by the Tamil and Burmese romusha. The camp was so filthy that for the first few weeks the POWs had to eat their meals under mosquito nets to keep the flies away.⁸⁹ Seeing the Tamils burying one of the romusha in a shallow grave, Medical Officer Rowley Richards suspected the man had died of cholera, so all the Japanese and POWs were immediately inoculated against this highly contagious and deadly disease. In spite of Richards’ efforts, a few cases of cholera did develop, and those POWs were quickly isolated from the rest of the troops. Several of the men died, but after a few weeks the camp was declared cholera free. Unfortunately, it was just the first local manifestation of a deadly cholera epidemic that was rapidly spreading up and down the railway line.

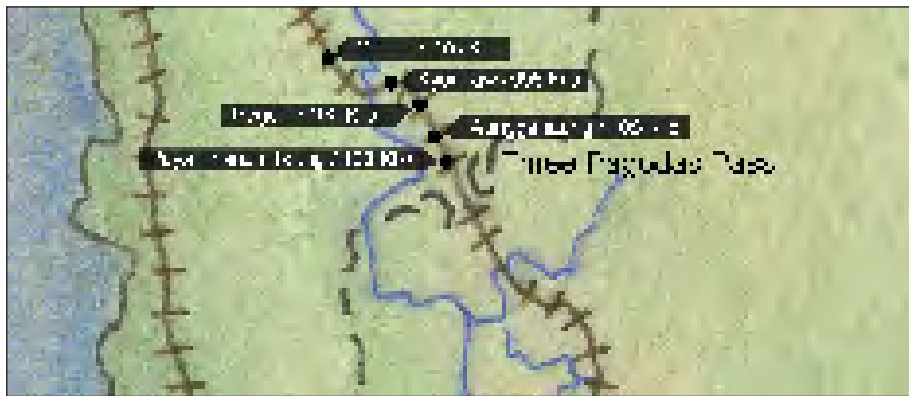


FIGURE 3.4. BURMA RAILWAY MAP #3. MEILOE—PAYA THANZU TAUNG.

Forced Marches. On 13 May, Anderson Force at Meiloe/075 Kilo began a forced march to Aungmyanaung/105 Kilo high in the Bilauk Taung Mountains. Though Jack Turner remained hospitalized at Thanbyuzayat, he recorded in his diary what he later learned about this journey in a section he titled “Nightmare March”: “After having worked all hours of the day and night for several weeks and working until 2 am in the morning, this march started. Men were in pitiful condition, many suffering with tropical ulcers and Malaria. Only the worst remained at the 75 Kilo camp to follow up by transport when the road was made.”⁹⁰

Monsoon Rains. Toward the end of May the monsoon rains arrived in all their fury, and American POW Roy “Max” Offerle at Regue/100 Kilo Camp had his first experience of the weather’s alarming consequences:

Actually, creeks and rivers form, and you can almost watch vegetation grow. The rainy or monsoon season turned everything to soup or mud, and they couldn’t get supplies up there easily. Then the speedup on work came. . . . Well, the men’s health broke down. We started getting lots of malaria, beriberi, dysentery, and tropical ulcers because it seemed that the germ that causes tropical ulcers was more prevalent in the rainy season.⁹¹

The severity of the monsoon and its consequences did not prevent “the Speedo” from going forward. Instead, the Japanese engineers only intensified their drive to complete the railway on time, and the POWs, many of whom were now reduced to wearing only a G-string “Jap-Happy,” were forced to eat, work, and sleep in the pouring rain.

For Aussie Tom Morris, still at Meiloe, this was his worst time on the railway, as he was seriously ill with dysentery and malaria and the rains never stopped. But he also remembered that the concert party “stalwarts did their best to provide entertainment by way of organized concerts.”⁹² To add to their misery, cholera broke out in the appallingly unsanitary conditions at one of the nearby romusha camps.

Allied Bombing Attacks

Back at Thanbyuzayat on 8 June, Bob Skilton was transcribing the noon BBC news broadcast heard on their secret radio when he heard about Allied bombers with longer-range capabilities. When he and Les Bullock performed their latest variety show that afternoon, they included the POW version of “She’ll be Coming Round the Mountain,” emphasizing the refrain, “When they come.” It took a few minutes for the audience to catch on to the significance of the lyrics, wrote Carter, but when they did, they went wild with cheering and whistling.⁹³

Four days later, they found out how prophetic those lyrics were. Just after breakfast, the first Allied bombing attack on the camp occurred. Kan was rehearsing with Cor Punt in a jungle clearing as the planes came in low over the camp.⁹⁴ Since the Japanese had not allowed the prisoners to mark the camp—not even the hospital—as a POW camp, Thanbyuzayat, sitting out in the open on the plain, was an inviting enemy target. Carter described the devastation that followed:

All mens were so stunned that they wasted valuable seconds in gaping and, just as they flung themselves to the ground, the bombs came tumbling down. The first scored a direct hit on the water tank and it disintegrated, together with the four water carriers. The centre of the parade ground, carpeted with prostrated men, their hands over their heads, suddenly erupted into two enormous craters. Screams of agony came from the [hospital] huts where helpless men, unable to move from the slats, were pierced with bomb splinters.⁹⁵

Thirty-six POWs died in the attack: Kan was horrified to see body parts strewn around. Others were seriously wounded and some would eventually die. Four days later another bombing raid killed an additional thirteen POWs.⁹⁶

Following these two devastating raids, the Japanese set up a temporary base camp at Kandaw/004 Kilo and evacuated the hospital to Retpu/030 Kilo. The secret radio operated by the Thanbyuzayat producer team of Bullock and Skilton was moved to Retpu as well. Everyone, sick or well, was forced to walk to their next camp carrying their own kit. “Those who could not walk, limped,” wrote Carter. “Those who could not even limp were carried by their emaciated mates, step by painful step, to a new ‘hospital’ at Retpu, thirty kilometers up the line.”⁹⁷ American Tom “Slug” Wright called it a death march: “From Thanbyuzayat to 8 Kilo Camp [Wagale], it was five miles. When people dropped dead, the Japs just left them there. . . . Some died right away, and some were alive laying there. I hoped that some natives with carts would bring them along. Not so.”⁹⁸

Wim Kan, Norman Carter, and the other POWs staggered into Retpu/030 Kilo on 26 June. With a stopover at Hlepauk/018 Kilo, it had taken them seven days to make the eighteen-and-a-half-mile journey. The new camp was in shambles and had to be rebuilt. Shortly after their arrival, Kan was asked to give his popular theatre anecdotes talk to the Dutch troops to cheer them up after their ordeal. Two days later, his troupe performed their first cabaret at Retpu in celebration of Prince Bernhard's birthday.^{xxix99} Skilton and Bullock's concert party activities in Retpu are unknown, but given their track record, it can be fairly certain that they set up shop there as well.

"An Incentive to Live"

During these worst months of "the Speedo," life for the POWs on the railway, especially in the forward camps, was unbearable. Receiving food and medical supplies from their base camp became impossible as the rains made the dirt access road impassible. Unlike the Thai side of the railway, where the construction followed the Kwai Noi, there was no waterway on the Burma side paralleling the work sites that could function as a conduit for supplies. Men despaired, and many lost the will to live, though medical officers, orderlies, and mates tried mightily to keep them alive. American Roy "Max" Offerle spoke about the challenge:

They tried everything in the world to save them, but some would quit eating and just give up. They would box them and slap their ears, cuss them, threaten them—everything in the world to get them to eat or to make them mad or to give them an incentive to live . . . they had been prisoners for so long, and the weather was so bad, and the conditions were so terrible that some of them just didn't have any will or reason to live. So they just gave up.¹⁰⁰

Those who remained alive during this time forced themselves—for their own survival—to bury their emotions. "If [a man] wanted to live," Edward Fong said, "I'd help him in every way I could. But if he gave me the impression or showed me the attitude that he didn't care, I just didn't have enough energy to expend on him."¹⁰¹

"What a Fantastic Lot!"

It was in this context that the few entertainers scattered among the POWs in the construction camps struggled to sustain the men's spirits. Tom Fagan's story demonstrates the importance of their efforts. Fagan, who was at Tanyin/035 Kilo, suffered from a tropical ulcer which had eaten away part of his leg: "I'm homesick, down in the dumps and have a feeling all is not going too well with this bunged-up leg of mine. . . . Can see a bit of flesh, don't know where the sinews or veins are. If I haven't got circulation, how come I'm still alive? Has me beat!"¹⁰²

One night he was carried from his bed space to attend a camp show. Afterward he confided to his diary:

^{xxix} Consort to Juliana, the daughter of Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands, and heir to the throne.

Last night was a great lift for all of us; the Nips allowed the boys to put on a concert. Hard to believe how sick men can change so rapidly. A bit of a sing-song, some laughter, a joke or two and one's anguish is, for a few minutes, gone. We enjoyed the show even though those who rendered items did so only with a great deal of willpower. They, too, suffered from various ailments and a few propped themselves up on crude bamboo crutches. What a fantastic lot!¹⁰³

“Rain—Rain—Rain”

June, July, and August were the height of the monsoon season. Kan's diary entry for 6 August reads, “Rain—rain—rain. It made rehearsing impossible.”¹⁰⁴ If this was true in the relative security of the hospital camp at Retpu, it was even truer for would-be entertainers in the forward construction camps. The incessant rain, along with the increased sickness and death produced by the horrendous “Speedo” work schedule, made further attempts at entertainment in these camps practically, if not totally, impossible.

Though the rain poured down, the men of Mobile Force No. 1 had been making progress in laying the tracks. In August, they were in the Apalain/o8o Kilo area, where they worked side by side with romusha. “Apparon was a dismal place,” wrote Jacobs. “We seldom saw the sun, and the gloomy atmosphere of the camp, hemmed in by jungle clad hills, and overhung by heavy thunder clouds, was made worse by the poignant notes of the ‘Last Post,’ which echoed daily from the cemetery over the hill. Every day we buried two or three men, for starvation, exhaustion and disease was taking its toll in increasing measure.”¹⁰⁵



FIGURE 3.5. “ZOOALS VELEN ONZER MAKKERS HEENGINGEN” (BURIAL DETAIL). BURMA CAMP 100 JULY–AUGUST 1943. LODIEWIKUS D. DE KROON. IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

The Struggle to Keep Going

With heavy losses among their personnel, Black, Green, and Ramsay forces had been combined into one unit and were now high in the mountains separating Burma from Thailand at Aunganaung/105 Kilo. With the new deadline for completion of the railway fast approaching, the Japanese engineers' demand for more and more laborers meant the light sick were now forced to work on the railway as well. To acquire additional workers, all the A Force troops in hospital at Retpu, including the "fit" but banished Norman Carter, were ordered to rejoin their former units now at Aunganaung.¹⁰⁶ Wim Kan and his N.E.I. unit stayed on at Retpu until the end of August.

The forty-seven-mile trek from Retpu/030 Kilo to Aunganaung/105 Kilo was, as it had been for Turner's mates previously, "a killer."¹⁰⁷ Carter was lucky: as an officer, he was able to hitch a lorry ride. Upon arriving in Aunganaung, American Edward Fong thought it "the bottom of the pit . . . it was high in the mountains and definitely cold at night. You were already in a weakened condition. You were still in the monsoon season. Supplies were short."¹⁰⁸ Aunganaung would function as the major field hospital for POWs working further up the line. But even in the "bottom of the pit," all was not lost. The previous inhabitants of Aunganaung had built a small proscenium theatre on the edge of the parade ground—an inviting possibility for camp entertainment.

Once back in camp, Carter was anxious about his reception after the *Radiosities* debacle. His fears were well founded: Colonel Ramsay still considered him in the "dog-box."¹⁰⁹ With the rapid deterioration of his men's health and morale, Ramsay was forced to convince the Japanese commandant that something urgent needed to be done so the prisoners would find the willpower to carry on. Though he knew Carter, a professional producer, was in camp, Ramsay gave the camp barber, Wally McQueen, permission to try his hand at forming a concert party—one that did not include Carter—to put on shows.

Wally McQueen's Concert Party

Besides Carter's old stalwarts Jim Anderson and Val Ballantyne, Lieutenant Ted Weller, who had a high "silver tenor" voice, was part of a quintet of new singers recruited by McQueen for his concert party. Weller recalled how the Japanese helped facilitate concert party attendance by allowing the POWs "to return from work parties earlier than usual" once a week—on one condition: the shows "would commence with the Japanese tune and finish with the Japanese tune but in between we would fit in our own concert."¹¹⁰

Compèred by Anderson, the concerts lasted approximately forty minutes. One unique type of entertainment produced was a "cod-opera"—a ballad-opera—created by stringing together the melodies of well-known popular and classical musical compositions with lyrics taken from another source. There were no sets or costumes; the singers only wore items that suggested their characters. As they stood on the bare stage, the audience was asked to imagine the unseen production elements from their actions and from indications in the sung text.¹¹¹

"The Three Little Pigs"^{xxx}

One of the cod-operas was built around the nursery rhyme "The Three Little Pigs." "For example," Weller explained, "Number One built his house of straw and he was portrayed as a boozier/playboy. Number Two pig built his house of sticks and he was portrayed as doing dance rehearsals all the time with no responsibilities. Number 3 pig who built his house of bricks was shown as a solid citizen. Mother Pig

^{xxx} See "The FEPOW Songbook" for the lyrics of another cod-opera based on "The Three Little Fishies."

told most of the story with each pig singing his part.”¹¹²

The following excerpts from the cod-opera include notation of the specific tune to which each verse was to be sung:

2. THREE LITTLE PIGS. ENTERING STAGE POSITIONS.

(“Susannah’s a funny old man”)

Presenting the Heroes in our little play

Snort–ay, Blurt–ay, Whistle– id-dil-de-ay

For we are the three little pigs

Snort–igs, Blurt–igs, Whistle id-dil-de-ings,

For we are the three little pigs.

3. MOTHER PIG. ENTRANCE. (“Sonny Boy”)

I am their Mother, they have no other,

I love my own pigies three.

4. WOLF. ENTRANCE.

Oh, I’m the big bad wolf,

Yes, I’m the big bad wolf.

I want to tell you folks,

That I’m the big bad wolf.

“The ‘Three Little Pigs,’” admitted Weller, “was like Tolstoy’s ‘War & Peace’ and seems to go on forever.”¹¹³ And so it does for twenty-eight more verses! It follows the story of the pigs’ narrow escape from the wolf using tunes such as “Little Brown Jug” and “Teddy Bear’s Picnic,” “Schubert’s Serenade” and the “Anvil Chorus,” among others. To “O My Darling, Clementine,” the Big Bad Wolf drops down the chimney into the boiling pot of turpentine waiting for him at the third little pig’s sturdy brick house, where the other two pigs have fled for protection.

27. PIGS.

Down the chimney came the wolfie

Crying out you’ll soon be mine

It was bonza^{xxxi} when his bronza^{xxxii}

^{xxxi} Australian slang for “great,” “super,” “well-done”—a much-used word in the Aussie vernacular. [Laurie Allison, E-mail, 23 January 2005.]

^{xxxii} Australian slang for “rear end,” “ass.”

Touched that boiling turpentine.

And as all good nursery rhymes must, the cod-opera, too, ended with a moral sung to the tune of the traditional Maori farewell song, “Now Is the Hour.”

32.

Now here is the moral to help you on your way:

Houses “Jerry” built are flimsy

And never, never pay,

They never, never stay.¹¹⁴

The emphasis on the phrase “‘Jerry’ built” was not only a covert reference to the railroad, which the POWs tried to sabotage, but a message of hope telling the audience that the Japanese Empire would eventually be defeated.^{xxxiii} In fact, the whole cod-opera was to be understood metaphorically.

“It probably seems strange,” wrote Weller, “that men in that age group were so entertained by such child-like stories but it seems the music just took them into another world and away from their miserable day to day existence, because these ‘plays’ were very well received. The singers were class singers with very good voices. Just goes to prove what music will do to help anyone to stay alive.”¹¹⁵ The performers, he noted, “would use the rest of the week trying to work out what the next concert may be.”¹¹⁶

“A Little Man in a Homemade Monkey Suit”

With his professional nose out of joint, Carter refused to attend the shows—for a time. But he didn’t fail to notice that they were extremely popular. After two weeks of sulking in his hut, listening to the howls of laughter coming from the audiences, Carter relented and went along as well. He discovered that the amateur performers put on a very professional show. Their orchestra consisted of three musicians: a guitarist (the leader), an accordionist, and a bass string player who had created a “jungle” bass fiddle out of a bamboo pole stuck in an empty petrol drum and signal wire.

The show opened with two singers, and then on to the stage bounded Wally McQueen, the camp barber, a little man in a homemade monkey suit with the longest tail I’d ever seen on any simian. Completely ignoring the audience and their whistles of delighted applause, he got down to business.

He climbed one of the poles which held up the roof—and everyone roared. He climbed down again, scratched himself and remarked, “There are other ‘monkeys’ in camp beside me,” and all cheered.^{xxxiv} He wound up his act by leaping from the stage to sit on Ron Winning’s lap while he hunted for lice in

^{xxxiii} It may also have been a reference to the status of the war in Europe, since Jerry was a slang term for Germans.

^{xxxiv} A reference to the Japanese, who had been depicted in racist Allied wartime propaganda as monkeys.

the adjutant's head. When he "found" some, he smacked his lips and declared, "Better than rice." Another leap took him back on stage, and holding up his tail with one hand like Felix the Cat, he made his exit to thunderous applause.¹¹⁷

For Arthur Bancroft, the entertainments at Aungganaung achieved a high standard of performance comparable to vaudeville shows he'd seen at the Tivoli Theatre in Sydney. And the bevy of buxom female impersonators, he noted, was very much appreciated, especially by the Japanese.¹¹⁸

As a professional theatre person, Carter must have been thoroughly rankled to not be involved in these shows. When his boredom became unbearable, he asked Adjutant Ron Winning to find him a job: "Well, there is a job—looking after the cemetery."¹¹⁹



FIGURE 3.6. BURMA RAILWAY MAP #4. AUNGGANANG—LITTLE NIKKI.

By September, Mobile Force No. 1 had laid the tracks from Kyondaw/095 Kilo to Paya Thanzu Taung/108 Kilo, high in the mountains just north of the Three Pagodas Pass, and was now across the border in Thailand at a staging camp at 116 Kilo.^{xxxv} When Jacobs saw the conditions in his new camp, he was horrified: "There was mud everywhere. A creek was running through the cookhouse, the latrines were overflowing with excrement and maggots. . . . The congestion was terrible, for the men had less than eighteen inches of floor space each, and in this tiny area they had to eat, sleep and stow their gear."¹²⁰

"Their Last Toehold on Sanity"

Railway construction was moving forward at a furious pace to meet its October deadline, and POWs in the forward camps, working under the most appalling conditions, were dying at an alarming rate. With many of the heavy sick being sent back to the hospital at Aungganaung, the huts there became so overcrowded that the Japanese contemplated calling a halt to all concerts until more accommodations could be built. Carter, for one, thought the idea of stopping the concerts idiotic. He was very aware of their therapeutic value: "For many prisoners, the concerts represented their last toehold on sanity. Cut them and up would go the sick rate."¹²¹ Nevertheless, all further concerts were canceled and, as Carter had predicted, the sick rate increased.

^{xxxv} These kilo designations are still given from the base camp at Thanbyuzayat. This camp does not have a name.

Fatalities

One man brought in by truck from up the line staggered into Carter's hut and sat down on his sleeping platform: "My visitor was in a shocking state," he wrote. "What had once been a head was now a bloated bladder with a few stringy hairs plastered on top. His body was almost fleshless and a grimy G-string hung precariously on protruding hips." It was Tommy Mann—the POW with the terrible singing voice whom Carter had not allowed to perform back in Bicycle Camp. Mann had seen the theatre as the lorry drove into camp and sought Carter out to ask him to fulfill the promise he had made back then: that at some future point Carter would let him perform in a concert party. That promise, he said, had kept him alive. Offering him additional hope to hang on, Carter lied again and promised Mann that he would definitely perform in the next show. Mann thanked him and started to leave, but as he inched off the bamboo bed slats, he suddenly fell over dead.

And Carter's response, like that of others faced with so much sickness and death, was to retreat into his shell: "Death was just around the corner for all of us at Anungaung [*sic*] and every man was far too intent on coming through alive to worry overmuch about those who did not. So life went on."¹²² Ironically, it was just this sort of emotional flattening that the concert parties he championed were trying to combat.

But Tommy Mann was not the last of his old Bicycle Camp mates that Carter saw at Aunggaung. On another day when yet another truckload of sick men was brought into camp, Carter learned that among them was his close friend and performer Doc Clarke, the man who had sung "Rice Belly Nellie" in *Tit Bits* and been cast as one of the ugly sisters in his aborted panto *Cinderella* back on Java. When Carter located him, Clarke had been placed in the triage hut. He died later that day.¹²³

"There Will Be a New Society"

"The Speedo" had long since passed by the POWs in the hospital camp back in Retpu. Though he was running a fever and had pains all over his body, Wim Kan continued to perform in the dysentery huts as well as for the whole camp.¹²⁴ Because of their isolation from the ongoing construction, the POWs in Retpu had time to focus on their recovery and other matters. Some of these other matters were political. Communist sympathizers in the camp were advancing the proposition that since they were all—officers and men alike—in the same boat, they were modeling a future classless society. Kan saw the sympathizers' actual conduct that belied these assertions—conduct he felt needed to be exposed. In his 4 September cabaret, Kan performed his new cautionary song, *Dat wordt de nieuwe Maaatschappij* ("There Will Be a New Society"). (Only the first two verses and the final refrain are given here.^{xxxvi})¹²⁵

1.

Friend Frits of Retpu 1, who thought a lot of himself,

*Founded the New Society from his *tampatje**^{xxxvii}

His neighbor on the right participated for a while, but then dropped out

Because he cared more about playing bridge than about a new world.

His neighbor on the left said: "I feel social, so I'll participate,"

^{xxxvi} See "The FEPOW Songbook" for the full text.

^{xxxvii} Sleeping space on the bamboo platform.

*And stole sugar from the Premier's pan on the sly.^{xxxviii}
 There were some ministers and everything went well:
 For half the day the New Front lay rotting in its nest.*

2.

*Promptly at 10 o'clock one will build the Society,
 Except yesterday, because the Premier was searching for salt.
 (He knew a little source: it was costing him almost a riks.^{xxxix}
 He got half a barrel—his ministers did not get anything.)
 He pushed two skinny guys aside near the pan with "kra"^{xl}
 And was caught in line getting two helpings of sambal,^{xli}
 And going home with his pan like a traitor.
 He called to "a fellow idealist" that there would be a meeting after lunch.*

Refrain:

*There will be the New Society.
 There the farmers wait in the queue for food.
 But he who knows better doesn't waste his time there,
 He goes around to the back door to get beefsteak.
 There in the New Society,
 The sun shines with justice, warmth and happiness.
 The biggest loudmouth sits on the best spot.
 We are all equal, but he is more equal than you.¹²⁶*

Kan's astute observation about the politics of what was really taking place in his camp was the same one George Orwell would make about the outcome of the Russian Revolution in his 1945 allegorical novel, *Animal Farm*: "ALL ANIMALS ARE EQUAL BUT SOME ANIMALS ARE MORE EQUAL THAN OTHERS."¹²⁷

The cabaret closed, as it usually did, with everyone singing the national anthem, but this time it got them into trouble. They were all sent to the Japanese commandant's office for a reprimand. No one had bothered to tell them that singing national anthems was now forbidden.¹²⁸

^{xxxviii} Sugar was given by the Japanese to the POWs for services rendered, which could be interpreted to mean that the POW had gone "Jap-Happy."

^{xxxix} Dutch slang for 2½ guilders.

^{xl} Unknown word for some sort of food.

^{xli} Indonesian finger food made with chili paste.

“Their Relentless Drive”

In late September, Mobile Force No. 1 left 116 Kilo for 122 Kilo Camp in the Songkurai area of Thailand and, Jacobs happily exclaimed, “for once the sun was shining.” The monsoon was finally drawing to a close. The new camp was “divided into two portions, one of which was occupied by the men of ‘F’ and ‘H’ Forces, and the other by ourselves,” wrote Jacobs. “A bamboo fence separated us, and communication between the two groups was forbidden.”¹²⁹ The Japanese did not want word to get out about how these POWs had been grossly abused. Mobile Force stayed at 122 Kilo a week and was then moved to Little Nikki/131 Kilo.¹³⁰

There, Jacobs was amazed once again by the “indomitable spirit” his men still exhibited despite their illnesses and long working hours: “Men were dying at the rate of six or seven a week, rations were getting worse, but the Japanese continued their relentless drive to get the railway finished before the end of October.”¹³¹ Little Nikki/131 Kilo would be the POWs final rail-laying camp.

By 1 October, Colonel Nagatomo had moved his headquarters to Mezali/070 Kilo so that he could oversee the final stage of the railway construction. In order to provide more workers for the final push, six days later Wim Kan and the sick N.E.I. POWs were evacuated from Retpu and transported by rail up the line to Paya Thanu Taung/108 Kilo. He found it unnerving traveling over the railway the POWs had built, the rails flexing up and down uncertainly (a fact he had satirized in the song “Visit to Burma in 1950”). By the second day in their new camp, his cabaret troupe had performed for more than a thousand men on an open-air stage. Afterward, in appreciation, the players received a pan filled with sugar from the Japanese. Kan’s wry response: “Very nice.”¹³²

But Kan’s health was still not good. During a cabaret on 16 October, he became dizzy and had trouble concentrating, making many mistakes. And this time the Japanese thought the songs he had sung were about them, so they confiscated his songbook. Once they translated his lyrics, they believed his satire was aimed not at them but at the foibles of his own society, whether back home or in the camp. Like the Nazi authorities in occupied France who would approve Jean Anouilh’s version of Sophocles’ Greek tragedy *Antigone* for performance in 1944,^{xlii} they had not been able to penetrate the ambiguities of what Kan had written to understand his subtext. They returned his songbook and told him to carry on.¹³³

The next day, near Konkoita in Thailand, the railway tracks from Burma joined those from Thailand. There was still work to be done ballasting the track, cutting and stacking wood, and establishing water points for the steam engines before the job was actually completed, but major construction on the Thailand-Burma railway was finished—the terrible “Speedo” was over.

The POWs now faced the next stage of their captivity.

^{xlii} Anouilh’s *Antigone* is a call for continued resistance no matter the cost. The Nazis thought the play supported King Creon’s arguments for collaboration.

Endnotes

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- 2 Jacobs, 28–29.
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- 5 Jacobs, 22–23, 31.
- 6 Jacobs, 44.
- 7 Whitecross, 39.
- 8 Whitecross, 39.
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- 23 Carter, 19.
- 24 Carter, 101–102.
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- 27 Carter, 103.
- 28 Carter, 104.
- 29 Carter, 104–105.
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- 66 Carter, 110–114 *passim*.
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- 84 Burgoyne, 202.
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- 101 Interview with Fong in LaForte and Marcello, 133.
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Chapter 4: The Interval

“Jungle Shows:” Thailand and Burma

When the Thailand and Burma sides of the railway were joined near Konkoita on 17 October, the worst was over for the sick, exhausted, and demoralized POW survivors—or so they hoped. They had built the railway, and now they could return to Changi, Singapore, to a world they had mythologized into an ideal “rest camp.” As the Japanese had anticipated, the end of construction had coincided with the end of the rainy season, so their troops and supplies could now be moved into Burma in readiness for the “liberation” of India.

Command Performances

As the end of major construction neared, concert parties were ordered to give “command performances” to celebrate the event. Though the prisoners’ participation in these festivities was morally questionable, most POW officers in charge knew they had no option but to comply. Looked at positively, the performances provided an opportunity to jump-start the rehabilitation process.

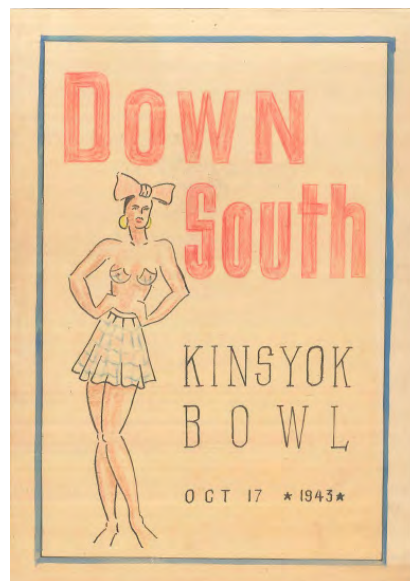


FIGURE 4.1. SOUVENIR PROGRAM. *DOWN SOUTH*. IWM CR (93.17.1).

At Kinsaiyok,ⁱ Thailand, the former Wampo concert party producer Charles Woodhams hadn’t mounted a production since late February, but he and musical director Reginald Dixon were able to cobble together a revue for command performance on 17 October. *Down South* was performed in a nearby natural amphitheatre called the “Kinsaiyok Bowl.” Since many of the performers were in hospital or scattered elsewhere, only six turns were on the playbill instead of the dozen or more usually presented. There was

ⁱ For this chapter, all “kilo” designations for the various camps have been dropped unless they refer to a new camp or are necessary for clarification.

no interval. The only indication that the chorus line “girls” —or a few of them, anyway—performed is the title of the opening number, “A Few Kicks.” The last item on the bill was the re-creation of a minstrel show from which the revue took its name. It featured “‘Babette,’ Douglas Sutor, Frank Wildman & The Coloured Folk.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The burly female impersonator “Babette” would have made a splendid “Mammy” figure, and given the image on the program cover, it is likely “the girls” appeared among “The Coloured Folk” as well. Given their recent experience, the white performers in blackface portraying black slaves in this minstrel show wouldn’t have been mocking them but identifying with them. The revue’s title may have been an allusion to the POWs’ expectations of being sent back “down south” to Singapore.

That same evening farther up the line at Takanun, Lieutenant John Coast witnessed his camp’s command performance:

a combined Jap-British show (by order) under an atap roof hastily erected on the square, a show in which British performers were exceedingly few and very reluctant to appear. As with all the Nip shows, it went on for hours; the Koreans were all roaring drunk on an issue of a pint of beer a man, and the British audience escaped as early as it could to the huts, where it examined and criticized the characteristics of the Japanese race till far into the night.²

A week later, on 24 October, a Japanese army touring band gave a concert at Takanun to which several medical officers, including Robert Hardie, had been “invited” along with a “motley collection of Japanese, Siamese, Tamilsⁱⁱⁱ and British POWs. . . . The hit of the evening was a war piece by a Japanese composer—*The Air War*—a terrific hullabaloo of drums, sirens, thunderous crashes and aero-engine noises from the strings. Banzai! Banzai!”^{iv3} The inclusiveness on the part of the Japanese regarding the composition of their invited audience is telling, supporting as it did their East Asia Co-Prosperity ideal.

There was a concert of music at Paya Thanzu Taung, Burma, during the first week of November, and at Aunganaung a joint Japanese-Australian variety show occurred on 2 November as part of a full-day celebration that included a “race meeting” for the Australians celebrating “Melbourne Cup Day.” During the late-morning concert, Australian POWs and Japanese soldiers performed alternately, the highlight of which was a “star” turn by Hochi, the Japanese commandant. “This distinguished officer gave a war dance,” noted Arthur Bancroft, “which consisted of the flashing of this two-handed sword with an accompaniment of silly symphony shrieks. Strict orders had been quickly passed by our officers to maintain a straight face. This was easier said than done.”⁴ Hochi’s traditional kabuki-like samurai dance with its highly stylized movements and vocalizations appeared utterly foreign to the POWs, ignorant as they were of this venerable Japanese tradition.

The concert lasted four hours and was, in Rohan Rivett’s estimation, so awful that many of the POWs left before it was over. He was among them. After lunch, the troops flocked to their homemade “lawn” and “paddock” and a performance more to their liking, one that also had “girls” parading on the arms of their beaus in “frocks.”⁵ The concert that evening was all POW—except that it, too, concluded with a repeat

ⁱⁱ With this production, Bill James (“Babette”) takes over responsibility for costuming the shows at Kinsaiyok.

ⁱⁱⁱ The term Tamils was used to refer to the indigenous contract workers generally but could also refer more specifically to another group of “romusha” originally from India who had been brought into Malaya as workers at the British-owned rubber plantations and tin mines.

^{iv} A patriotic battle cry. The band may have performed in the celebrations at Konkoita earlier.

of Hochi's dance that Rivett (who sat through the whole concert this time) interpreted metaphorically as a conflict between Good and Evil.⁶

The Interval: Mid-October '43-February '44

After the two ends of the railway were joined, there was a sudden decrease in the number of workers needed to finish the ballasting, set up the water stations, and fell the wood required for the steam engines. For the next three and a half months there would be a lull—an interval—that would give the I. J. A. time to decide what to do with the thousands of POWs and romusha in railway camps on both sides of the border. With their whole focus on completing the railway, the Japanese had apparently not given much thought to what would happen afterward.

While awaiting that decision, the POWs in small camps were moved to larger, more centrally located hospital/transit camps. Not until after the Christmas holidays would most of them learn what was next in store. Physically and psychologically exhausted, the other ranks laborers had little will left to live. This breather gave the POW administrative and medical officers time to focus their attention on restoring the men's physical and psychological health before their expected return to Singapore. To accomplish these goals, camps as well as men needed rehabilitating.

By the end of "the Speedo," many up country hospital/transit camps had become sprawling hellholes. Administrative and medical staff were overwhelmed, and as hundreds of additional POWs from the smaller camps arrived daily, housing and medical facilities already overstretched quickly became more so. Food and medical supplies were still in short supply, with no sign of impending change. Thousands of men in close quarters with nothing to do only exacerbated the situation and an atmosphere of despair pervaded the camps. Welfare schemes that could engage the POWs in physical and mental activities needed to be implemented immediately in order to give the men something to focus on rather than brooding on their troubles. Some of the most effective were instituted by Weary Dunlop at Tarsao.

In late October, Medical Officer Lieutenant-Colonel Weary Dunlop left Hintok Cutting to take charge of the large hospital and convalescent depot in the hellhole of Tarsao. On arrival, he began the struggle to reorganize the hospital and clean up the dreadfully unhygienic conditions, which had led to several recent instances of cholera. Near the end of November, he turned his attention to rehabilitation. Dunlop knew the men needed something to do to occupy their minds and bodies. If there were only so many camp duties and too many men to do them, then other activities had to be found that involved the POWs, even the light sick, in their own convalescence. Team sports were out of the question, but activities such as arts and crafts, cottage industries, and entertainment were possible. When Dunlop sought permission from the Japanese command to institute a comprehensive rehabilitation scheme, they recognized the benefit of turning the POWs back into potential workers once again.⁷ The first step was to locate a few would-be entertainers who might organize weekly concert parties.

"Memories, Imaginations and Natural Inventiveness"

Dunlop's rehabilitation plans were among the most elaborate on the railway, but other officers and other ranks recognized the same need and tried to follow suit. Starting concert parties "from scratch" (as at Tarsao) or re-starting them to provide entertainment on a regular basis would be a tall order for the small number of entertainers who, after months of back breaking labor, debilitating illnesses, and loss of their numbers, were in need of rehabilitation themselves. As in the past, potential performers were encouraged to volunteer. While laughter, of course, would be the best medicine for the POWs' ills, finding

someone who could sing or play a musical instrument was far easier than finding comedians who could provoke laughter beyond telling dirty jokes. Given what the POWs had endured, there was some question as to whether they would ever laugh again.

226 Kilo. Taking a cue from what John Coast and others had done in the Takanun main camp during “the Speedo,” a concerted effort was made in 226 Kilo, the Takanun overflow camp, to engage the POWs in activities that might alter their attitudes and the overall depressing atmosphere. “Lacking anything in the way of reference, relying purely on our memories, imaginations and natural inventiveness,” recalled Ronald Hastain, “we devised lively and informative talks, which stimulated interest even in those whose natural powers of perceptiveness were not of the most brilliant.”⁸ Their effort also involved weekly entertainment.

And on Saturday nights (or their equivalent, for any night before a *yasume* was Saturday to us), some dried bamboo would be piled in the centre of the camp square. Around the fire we would cluster in a wide circle and the accordion player would render the old tunes that had begun to have such an effect of pleasant nostalgia. There was also a performer on a ukulele made from an old cigar box and a strand of wire. (“Chinese Laundry Blues,” and “When I’m Cleaning Windows!”)⁹

The accordion player was Frankie Quinton; the performer with the ukulele he’d made back in Changi was Tom Boardman.

With little encouragement volunteers would come forward and sing. Sometimes the old sentimental ballads, sometimes the pathetic crooner warbling into a bit of tin on the end of a bamboo stick, to represent the “mike.” Then there was the raconteur of the *risqué* story and the determined reciter of “If” or “Gunga Din.”

When the fire died down and the last strains of “When Day Is Done,” had come from the overworked accordion, we would drift off to our huts, with memories flooding in as a result of hearing the familiar tunes. One could reconstruct one’s life from hearing the old, oft-plugged tunes of the years before the war. The tunes often made men talk.¹⁰

Hastain’s observations on entertainment’s effectiveness on the POWs’ sensibilities illustrate the crucial role it played as part of rehabilitation schemes. Music, with its ability to unlock memories, penetrated the POWs’ protective emotional armor with recollections of something other than the horrors of the railway. If hearing familiar songs helped them begin to “reconstruct” their lives, it also brought them more fully into the present, encouraging them to reconnect with each other. As with any therapeutic treatment, constant reinforcement was required for lasting effect. It wasn’t long before Hastain noticed, “The atmosphere of the camp changed. A fervent interest in all sorts of matters was engendered. There was

a questing for truth and knowledge.”¹¹

Takanun Main Camp. Meanwhile, a trio of talented men worked to establish a concert party in the main camp. Corporal Leo Britt had been a producer in “The Mummie Bees” concert party back in Changi;^v and Captain Gibby Inglefield, a choral conductor in the 18th Division; but Lieutenant Gus Harffey, the self-styled swing band conductor, had never, as far as is known, performed in any Changi entertainment. In seeking approval for a concert party, they were fortunate to have I. J. A. Group II Commandant Lieutenant-Colonel Yanagida in Takanun.^{vi} Among the POWs he had a reputation for taking a sincere interest in their welfare. He readily approved their request.¹²

The first shows (27 November and 4 December) offered by Harffey and Britt were “Amateur Night” contests that were really auditions for the concert party.¹³ Once the finalists were chosen, the official “Takanun Players” was born, with Harffey as officer in charge. Inglefield in the meantime had been recruiting singers for a choir. With a concert party formed, Yanagida gave permission for a theatre to be built and agreed to relieve the “artistes” of other camp duties so they could rehearse.¹⁴ What they built wasn’t an open-air theatre but a proscenium theatre with wings, an orchestra pit, and a “sort of dressing-room behind” on a sandy bar near the bathing point on the Kwai Noi.¹⁵ Audience seating was sculpted into the high riverbank facing the stage. It was called the “Beach Pavilion Theatre” in remembrance of famous seaside resort theatres back home.

Swim for Supper

Swim for Supper, the appropriately named first show that opened the theatre on 11 December—an hour of swing music by “Gus Harffey and his boys”—immediately livened up the camp atmosphere.¹⁶ Elsewhere, Inglefield’s choir began a series of carol services in hospital wards. And a week later, Leo Britt staged his first theatrical revue.

In this revue Medical Officer Hugh “Ginger” de Wardener, already renowned for his selfless treatment of cholera patients, made his theatrical debut—as a ballet danseur. His partner—the ballerina—in this farcical pas de deux was Lieutenant Douglas Morris. De Wardener retained vivid memories of their performers:^{vii}

I wouldn’t forget it; it was my first contribution. . . . And it lasted three and a half minutes. And we practiced for nine hours [for] this ballet. And there was this fellow who actually played the squeezebox [when] we practiced.^{viii} . . . Oh, yes, the whole thing was comic . . . a lot of falling about, but in time with the music, and so on. And it worked very well. . . . [Morris] was small and I was relatively big, so that worked well. . . . I had to catch him. And I did, two or three times. Then I missed him, you see, and he flew through the air. But it was [the] sand [stage floor he landed on].¹⁷

Audio



4.1

^v He had been sent up country from Chungkai after staging the Christmas show there in 1942.

^{vi} Yanagida had moved his headquarters to Takanun in August so he could better supervise the treatment of his POWs during the final months of “the Speedo.”

^{vii} This routine had been standard fare in military concert parties for a long time.

^{viii} This accordionist was most likely Frankie Quinton.

In rehearsal for Christmas was an even bigger show: a pantomime—*Babes in Thailand*—based on the traditional British panto *Babes in the Woods*, but rewritten by Harffey.

Aungganaung. Before the concert party at Aungganaung, Burma, could perform again, the theatre had to be refurbished. In the months since its last use, it had suffered from neglect and the monsoon rains. The hard-packed mud stage had to be resurfaced, a new atap roof attached, and the orchestra pit drained. When all was ready, amateur producer Wally McQueen and his troupe put on another of their variety shows. But this time instead of the anticipated roar of approval, the audience thought the three-piece band tiresome and McQueen's repeat of his monkey act a bore.¹⁸ Unable to come up with any new musical arrangements or comic routines, McQueen, like Johnny Jevons before him, had fallen back on sure-fire content from his last show. But his audience, though, was ready for something new and different, not a rehash of old material—an important lesson for any would-be producers to learn.

As a professional producer, Norman Carter, still out of favor with Colonel Ramsay for his salacious *Radiosities* production back in April, knew he could rescue the situation. As he had proved in the past, what the troops needed to engage their minds and emotions was something with characters and a story, not another a variety show. He asked the padre to inquire whether he might be allowed to put on a pantomime of *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* if he promised that “it would be as clean as Mum's Monday wash.”¹⁹ Given the camp's desperate need for entertainment, Ramsay gave Carter another opportunity to prove his worth.

Carter enlisted Wally McQueen's performers and stagehands to help produce the pantomime. Discovering Frank Purtell, his old Bicycle Camp wardrobe master, in the camp, Carter engaged his services once again as well.^{ix} On Purtell's recommendation, he recruited Frank Brydges as his set designer and painter. Pinched tarpaulins served as material for scenery backdrops, and a dead tree trunk was shaped into the magic boulder for the “open sesame” scene. Various colored stones were crushed into dry powder for paint. When Brydges showed Carter sketches for the different sets, he remarked, “Nice work Frank, but what are you going to paint with?” Brydges bent over half a kerosene tin filled with water and produced—a shaving brush!²⁰ And thus, the pantomime of *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*—in a shortened forty-minute (“potted”) version with the forty thieves cut to four by casting and costuming limitations—was in the works. The Aungganaung POWs, starved for entertainment, would feed on rumors about the show until it opened on Christmas Day.

Shimo Songkurai. At the F Force encampment at Shimo (Lower) Songkurai, a small concert was held in the dysentery ward, the initial attempt at starting a concert party as part of their rehabilitation program. Stanley Wood-Higgs, one of the patients, remembered a parody sung to the nursery rhyme tune “Three Blind Mice”:

Three times a night.

Three times a night.

See how we run.

See how we run.

We all sit out on the bog in a row,

Cursing the War and the people we know.

^{ix} Purtell had been the wardrobe master for the Pow-Wow Concert Party shows in Bicycle Camp, Java.

*We'll all be happy when we don't go,
Three times a night.*²¹

Though still deadly, dysentery was now something that could be laughed at. Wood-Higgs admitted they hadn't had such "good fun" in a very long time. Two days later commandant Colonel F. J. Dillon and his assistant Major Wilde further revved up the troops' morale by performing in a concert for the entire camp. It was the first concert since they had left Changi six months earlier.²²

Paya Thanzu Taung. At Paya Thanzu Taung, Burma, the Dutch entertainer Wim Kan was dealing with his own problems in keeping his cabaret going. Even during the worst months of "the Speedo" he had been able to produce some sort of entertainment for the Dutch/Indonesian troops. But since his reprimand for singing the Dutch national anthem at Retpu on 4 September, Kan had come under suspicion for subversive activity. After his cabaret on 16 October, his songbook had been confiscated and inspected for inappropriate content. When he sought clearance to deliver his humorous theatre anecdotes in a cabaret on 31 October, he had been denied permission, informed by the Japanese censor that his stories weren't funny. But Kan inserted them in between turns in the show anyway and crowed, "There was lots of laughter," in his diary afterward.²³

For his 14 November cabaret, Kan used the same song, *Whitte muizen* ("White Mice"), to open and close the show and introduced two new songs he had written to confront activities by fellow POWs he felt were undermining their ability to recover their equilibrium.²⁴

"Everything Points To It"

In *Alles wijst erop* ("Everything Points to It"), Kan attacked hopes about the end of the war generated by false "prophets," who claimed to have divined "signs" about its progress. The song has a unique strophe-antistrophe structure. In one stanza, "pertinent signs" are read by one prophet as proof that the war will soon be over: "Really, everything points to it." In the next stanza, it is the absence of these same "signs" that leads another prophet to believe it will end shortly: "Really, it's nearly over." The song concludes with an epode presenting a third point of view that mocks both types of prophets for spreading false hopes.

*Masters, in [your] conclusions, you claim all sorts of pertinent nonsense
With an important air. I notice that the time affects your talk.
Your second childhood is not far off.
Really, everything points to it.
Really, you should put a stop to it as quickly as possible.
Slowly but for certain you are growing senile: all those conclusions are infantile.
See how slowly you decay from an intelligent man into a chicken without a head.*²⁵

“Normal and Abnormal”

In his other song, *Normaal en abnormal* (“Normal and Abnormal”), Kan tackled the POWs’ fears that after years of imprisonment they would never be able to readjust to normal life. Kan tries to convince them that what they did every day as prisoners in order to survive—actions that in the twisted logic conditioned by their situation had become “normal”—should be understood as temporary, not permanent.

The lyrics for the last verse state the present case:

*And when you see all these things clearly before your eyes,
You often get the feeling of: I'll never be there again.
This abnormal life seems the normal life.
The past becomes a kind of fairy-tale.
It seems more normal to sleep by the railway tracks than
Cuddled up in Mitropa's^x sleeping-car;
To make dinner of rat livers is more real than: “Butcher, an ounce of ground beef!”
Because of this necessity one often forgets the temporariness.*

In the final refrain, the perspective is changed to the future, when the war is over and the men are home once again:

*But one day you are eating at Heck's^{xi}
Till a raw scream signals panic.
After you've inquired about it, you know the reason:
A huge rat walked straight through the public dining room.
After hearing this news, you stare at your veal liver . . .
Nauseated, you suddenly remember the rat from the past,
And you cannot explain anymore how for two years
You did the abnormal and called it normal.²⁶*

[The complete lyrics to both songs are found in the “FEPOW Songbook.”]

Instead of receiving the usual congratulations and gifts from the Japanese when the cabaret was over, Kan learned his show had caused considerable consternation. Was it thought the framing song “White Mice” might be making covert comments about the POWs as caged laboratory animals? Did the Japanese suspect that “Everything Points to It” (which dismisses predictions about the end of the war) might, in fact, be giving credence to them? Did they see his use of the future tense in the conclusion of “Normal and

^x A European railway famous for its sleeping cars.

^{xi} A well-known Dutch restaurant.

Abnormal” as somehow predicting its end as well? Once again, it must have been difficult for the Japanese to understand Kan’s ironic tone and topsy-turvy logic: surely he must be putting something over on them—the audience’s laughter confirmed it. They may have been right. Kan later confided to his diary, “The Jap was being difficult; every time now something was ‘no good.’”²⁷

Hindato/198 Kilo. Meanwhile, back across the border in Thailand, Jimmy Walker and his rail-laying crew had been moved from the Kinsaiyok area further up the line to Hindato/198 Kilo rather than down the line as expected. Now that the railway work was done, their Japanese commandant, Major Chida, put his own rehabilitation scheme into effect. One of his projects was to have the POWs build a roadway through the jungle paved with millions of smooth pebbles laboriously dredged up from the nearby riverbed.²⁸ At least that’s how Walker understood what they were doing. But given Chida’s later projects at Nong Pladuk,^{xii} a better explanation might be that he was having the POWs create a Zen-inspired “dry river” landscape.

More important to the POWs’ morale, though, were the camp concerts Walker and others performed during their yasume days. “Two lads” produced a song for one of the shows, he recalled, that was “written to the rhythm of the train. It went something like this [singing]:

*Way up in old Kinsaiyok^{xiii}
Where all the girls are Thai-o
There’s lots of hot sweet coffee,
Lots of peanut toffee.
If you hear a sort of rumble,
Then [a] groan and then a grumble,
Don’t [you] shake at the knees,
Don’t you rush to grab a rifle,
Stick around, get an eye full,
It’s coming through the trees.
Hop along aboard, boys,
Now you know.
It’s the express to Kinsaiyok.*

*We built that railroad; made it run.
Then we thought, “That’s our work done.”
But the Nips said, “No, no, don’t you go.
You’ve only just begun.”
And so we came to Hindato,*

^{xii} See Chapter 7: “The Show Must Go On.”

^{xiii} Pronounced “Kin-sai-oh.”

All men, Speedo! Starto!
Doo-aa, Doo-aa, Doo-aa
But before this lot's over,
We're going to see those Cliffs of Dover.
Doo-aa, Doo-aa, Doo-aa . . .

Then it would fade away.”²⁹

Audio



4.2

“You’ve only just begun” may refer to Major Chida’s roadway project, but the lyrics may have other more ominous implications as well.

In Memoriam

On 20 November the I. J. A. required each camp along the railway to hold a memorial service honoring the Japanese, Allied POWs, and romusha who had lost their lives during its construction. Forced to participate in these services, the POWs were disgusted at what they saw as the height of hypocrisy on the part of the Japanese in conducting them.

New Restrictions

As the next day was still considered part of the commemoration, new regulations forbade whistling and singing in Kinsaiyok and, in addition, stipulated “no [audience] singing, laughing, or applause” could occur at the concert that night.³⁰ Though the restrictions would only be temporary, they had an understandably dampening effect on audience response to the evening’s show.

During the month since their last production, Woodhams and company had built a new free-standing proscenium theatre they christened the “Scala Theatre” after a well-known variety playhouse in London. With side wings and slush lamp footlights, this new structure allowed Woodhams to return to his former emphasis on high production values. The costumes and other theatre paraphernalia so carefully transported all the way from Wampo up to Kinsaiyok could now be safely brought out and refurbished.³¹

Revue du Monde

With *Revue du Monde*, his new show for the month, Woodhams was back in form. The show had two acts, fifteen numbers, and an interval. The full chorus line was also back: as part of the Act I closer, its members appeared as the “Rockettes.” For this nod to the famous Radio City Musical Hall troupe known for its precision and high-kicking routines, they had the services of a new choreographer, Arthur Woodroff Hill, who had supposedly “trained choruses professionally.”³²

The company had also gained several new performers: the “Harmonica Boys” and a solo female

impersonator, Frank Goodall, who called himself “Miss Fortune”: “an inhabitant of Grant Road, Bombay”—a notorious red-light district.³³ *Revue du Monde* also marked the first appearance by Pat Donovan (the former professional boxer now a member of the chorus) and Douglas Sutor in a series of ballroom “romance in dance” routines. With the services of “George Hart, Ltd., Décor and Furniture Providers,” Woodhams could begin to enhance his shows with props and settings.³⁴

Though the audience was not permitted to sing, laugh, or applaud during the show, they did, according to George Wiseman, make “rude comments on the song ‘Keep young and beautiful,’ as most of the chaps had some skin disease or other.”³⁵ Aussie Ray Parkin, in Kinsaiyok on temporary duty, thought the production, with its costumes, scenery, and lighting, “lavish” compared to those his unit had been able to mount back in Hintok Cutting.³⁶

“A Flying Concert Party”

Besides observing the required memorial services on the Burma side of the railway, Lieutenant-Colonel Nagatomo wanted to commemorate the first anniversary of his POW Accommodation Administration (Group III) and the arrival of the first POWs from Singapore in 1942 with a series of concerts by a group of performers drawn from various camps.³⁷ These men would form a touring company—a “flying concert party”—that would shuttle up and down the line performing in A Force camps, most of which had no entertainment of their own. Camps without stages were ordered to construct one in preparation for the troupe’s visit.³⁸

Not all of the members of this multinational concert party are known, but it did include Wim Kan and a number of his key cabaret performers (Hans Ryke, Nico Rayer, Cor Punt, Pat Levy), as well as a Brit named Mackintosh, the comedy team of Bob Skilton and Les Bullock, a Dutch magician named Cortini, and other singers and musicians.³⁹

After an initial concert on 19 November at Aunganaung for N.E.I. POWs, the flying concert party began their hectic five-day tour. From the reports of those who saw the show, it provided just the tonic needed to lift their spirits. At Little Nikki across the border, Major Jim Jacobs with rail-laying Mobile Force No. 1 wrote, “They gave us a splendid show that evening. Sgt. Bob Skilton and Les Bullock were very entertaining in comedy patter, while a Javanese vocal and instrumental trio proved excellent entertainers. Their harmonising in Hawaii [sic] and other popular numbers would have done credit to any first class vaudeville show at home.”^{xiv40} For one unidentified Aussie, the show was better than anything he had anticipated: “It was a professional, refreshing show that proved beyond doubt, no matter the suffering, there is always a group who can minimize miserable moments and build up morale.”⁴¹ The three hundred Dutch/Indonesians who had walked over from the main camp at Little Nikki to hear the concert shared his opinion.⁴²

At Paya Thanzu Taung, Arnold Jordon reported, “One of the finest displays of wizardry and sleight-of-hand one could wish to see anywhere was given by a clever young Dutch lad [Cortini] who, with no more than a tattered shirt to hide his wash-board ribs and to make do for voluminous sleeves etc. of the stock-in-trade, delighted us with his performance.”⁴³ On the flying concert party’s way “speedo, speedo” to Khonkhan, the farthest camp west on their tour, they stopped at Regue, home camp for the magician and several of the other Dutch/Indonesian performers on the tour. There they gave two performances before leaving for Khonkhan, the hospital camp where Senior Medical Officer Colonel Albert Coates had achieved fame performing successful leg amputations.

^{xiv} The trio would be the Ockerse Brothers and “another Dutchie.”

Two acts on the playbill of the “all-stars” performance at Khonkhan became forever imprinted in Jim Whittaker’s consciousness. One was the recitation of Arthur Clough’s poem “Say Not the Struggle Naught Availeth.” From the charge in the opening stanza—

*Say not the struggle naught availeth,
The labour and the wounds are vain,
The enemy faints not, nor faileth,
And as things have been they remain*

to the exhortations in the stanzas that followed,

*If hope were dupes, fears may be liars;
It may be, in yon smoke conceal’d,
Your comrades chase e’en now the fliers,
And, but for you, possess the field.^{xv44}*

—every line spoke so meaningfully to Whittaker that he memorized it on the spot.

The other act was an audacious farcical sketch performed by Skilton and Bullock. As Whittaker recalled, there were two panels of bamboo matting on stage painted white, one slightly upstage and taller than the other:

I vividly remember this low screen and the tip of the bald head colored red, coming above as the words, “Sunrise!” were spoken. Then the man on stage, a prisoner with a stick of some kind (probably a bamboo thing^{xvi}), said, “Sunset!” and tapped the bald head [laughs] . . . and the top of it disappeared behind [the screen]. . . . But the Japanese didn’t get the significance of it. Everybody else roared with laughter—thought this was great. Japanese probably thought it was an Anglo-slapstick, or something from Charlie Chaplin.⁴⁵

Audio



4.3

It’s hard to believe the Japanese in the audience didn’t immediately recognize this mockery of

^{xv} Time had not dimmed Jim Whittaker’s recollection: he quoted the complete poem from memory during his interview sixty years later. Unfortunately, it was before the recording equipment was running.

^{xvi} Most likely a swagger stick carried by officers.

their national flag and prediction of their defeat—or that the raucous laughter did not tip them off that something was amiss—but apparently not.^{xvii}

The “flying concert party” finished its tour at Mezali on 23 November, where three days later they gave a command performance for Lieutenant-Colonel Nagatomo.⁴⁶ But to Kan’s disgust, the gifts they expected for the success of the tour didn’t materialize. Instead, Nagatomo suggested the concert party become permanent and continue to tour the railway camps. Kan wanted no part of that scheme. Two days later the all-stars split up and returned to their home camps.⁴⁷

When Kan arrived back in Paya Thanzu Taung, he fell ill and was hospitalized with an infected foot and malaria. He had no appetite, which he quipped was “good, because there was no food anyway.” Even as he lay on his bed in the hospital ward, POWs begged him to perform, which he did in his feverish state, telling many jokes—but sitting down.⁴⁸

The Wider War

Late in 1943, the “outside” war in the Pacific began to make its presence directly known to the POWs along the railway, supposedly hidden from the world, giving them hope that they had not been forgotten. Attacks by Allied bombers on railway sites in Burma that started back in June, causing deaths and casualties among the POWs, were well known to everyone up and down the line. Allied reconnaissance planes were now seen over the Thai side of the railway, and the men speculated that these would soon be followed by bombing raids as well. Though the Japanese became increasingly apprehensive about the possibility of these attacks, they still refused to let any of the POW camps be identified as such, which caused the prisoners to fear what the future might bring.

Troop Movements

During the latter part of November, I. J. A. Malayan Command began evacuating the remnants of F Force and H Force back to Singapore, raising the other POWs’ hopes that they, too, would soon follow. The heavy sick were transported down to the hospital camps at Kanburi for recuperation before continuing on to Singapore. By late December, I. J. A. Southern Army Command began evacuating its A Force troops in Burma south as well, but, as they would discover, not back to Singapore.

^{xvii} When this sketch was performed as part of my play, “Return to Kanburi,” Nagase Takashi, a former interpreter for the Kempeitai who was in the audience, told me that if he had seen it while in Thailand, he would have reported it.



FIGURE 4.2. “FAREWELL PERFORMANCE”
PLAYBILL, RIMBOE CLUB, WATERCOLOR.
LODEWIKUS D. DE KROON. IMAGE
COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE,
NETHERLANDS.

On 22 December an elaborate *Afscheidsvoorstelling* (“farewell performance”) was put on at Regue by the “Rimboe Club”^{xviii} in honor of their departing commandant, Captain van Beck, who was leading the first draft of POWs leaving for their new base camp in Thailand. Although performances by this group of Dutch/Indonesians have not been reported earlier, the number of entertainers and the variety of their program suggests they had occurred.^{xix} The elaborate souvenir *programma* (“playbill”) is illustrated with vignettes of their life at Regue. Among other acts on the bill was an opening “repertoire” (comic patter?) by van Dorst (their adjutant); a *mappentrommel* (“grab bag of jokes”) by van Dalmen “and his guys”; van Dalm with his musicians, the “Dutch Blue Four”; magic tricks by Cortini; and a finale featuring a “Miss Waikiki” performing a Hawaiian hula.^{xx}

The Holidays

Christmas 1943: “Make ’em Laugh!”

The Christmas festivities produced by the POWs provided the real test of whether entertainment was making any progress on changing attitudes and camp atmospheres. The padres with their religious services would commemorate those who had died; the entertainment would focus the survivors’ attention on the present. Traditionally, Christmas shows in the military had to be special—something new and different to take the men’s minds off their loved ones back home—not just another regular variety show. Devising elaborate revues, pantomimes, and variety shows would test the entertainers’ capabilities as well, stretching the limits of their “memories, imaginations, and natural inventiveness.” Their success would be measured by how much they managed to “make ’em laugh.”

As many of the A Force POWs in Burma were in the process of being evacuated to Thailand,

^{xviii} “Rimboe” was another designation for Regue/100 Kilo.

^{xix} There is very likely material on this group in Dutch archives.

^{xx} Playbill translations by Margie Bellamy.

information on their holiday celebrations are scarce. There is no record of a Christmas show at Paya Thanzu Taung; Wim Kan was still in hospital and made very few diary entries during this time. Nor does Major Jacobs record a celebration—not even a sing-along (which is odd)—other than a special meal at Little Nikki. He recalled their previous Christmas, “when we laughed at the chap who called out to the visiting band, ‘Come again next year,’” and ruminated on why celebrations in Burma were limited: “Many members of the band had since died in the jungle, and the remainder were split up among the other camps.”⁴⁹



FIGURE 4.3. CHRISTMAS PROGRAM. IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

For the Dutch/Indonesians who remained in Regue, the Christmas Eve celebration around a campfire included a choir singing traditional carols, a flannel board–type^{xxi} retelling of the Christmas story, distribution of special treats, and a recitation of Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*.^{xxii50}

Caroling. Traditional carols were sung on Christmas Eve in other camps as well. At Takanun, Gibby Inglefield’s choir strolled about the camp “carrying flaming, musky, sputtering torches” and singing carols that ranged “from 14th century melodies only rarely heard in England, to the typical Christmas Day hymns.” Their only musical instrument besides Inglefield’s tuning fork had been a small portable harmonium.⁵¹ A few miles down the line at Hindato, the effect of caroling after lights out while carrying “coconut oil lamps and torches of pitch” created “an unearthly happiness” for Stephen Alexander.⁵² But for Jimmy Walker and his mates listening in their hut, the memories evoked were nearly unbearable: “The kids and their stockings and ‘What is *she* thinking?’”

Our second Christmas as prisoners. Pray God it’s the last.

Quiet we sat and then, from the hot starlit night outside came the strains of “Silent Night.” Sweet harmonious voices . . . “All is calm, all is bright . . .” Men fought with tears . . . “Yonder where sweet Mother and Child . . .” Outside a brave band of carollers, under our Battalion choirmaster, Lt. Purcell, were observing the wondrous tradition. . . . “Rest in heavenly peace . . .”

“Buggairo!”^{xxiii} . . . Kuddah!”^{xxiv}

The Jap lashed amongst the singers with his rifle butt.

^{xxi} That is, illustrated.

^{xxii} Program translation by Margie Bellamy.

^{xxiii} Japanese swear word.

^{xxiv} “Stop!” or “Come here!”

“Kuddah!”

The lovely hymn ended abruptly as the conquerors vented their spleen.⁵³

The carolers did not have permission to sing after lights out.

At Hintok River Camp/155 Kilo,^{xxv} community singing around campfires until lights-out on Christmas Eve had put the men of Dunlop Force “in high spirits,” noted Captain C. W. Wells, “such a change from a few months back when never a laugh was heard nor a smile seen during those ghastly days of The Purge (‘the Speedo’).”⁵⁴

Variety Shows and Revues. Demanding the least amount of rehearsal time, variety shows or revues were the easiest productions for the POWs to put on. Held together by the jokes and running commentary of a compère, or a thin plotline, they could incorporate the widest range of performers one might find in camp.

Fun with F. A.^{xxvi}

In Hintok River the POWs had received permission to hold a Christmas concert party only four days prior to the holiday, but in that time a small group of dedicated officers had built a stage at the base of a hill and terraced the slope for audience seating while a ragtag group of entertainers quickly pulled together a show. On Christmas Day, their hastily improvised revue, *Fun with F. A.*, was “a howling success.”⁵⁵ Ray Parkin, back in camp after his stint in Kinsaiyok, described its premise: “It took the form of a broadcast from a radio station whose call-sign was ‘K-U-R-R-A,’^{xxvii} Thailand—the *call that gets attention!*” The station was competing in a £50,000 prize for the best broadcast programme.”⁵⁶ As a series of contestants appeared, the contest got completely of hand.

The comic sketch that had the audience rolling in the aisles was “the heart-breaking, though slightly improper, love tragedy between Ferdinand the Bull and Jessie the Cow. . . . Jessie coyly woos Ferdinand across a barbed wire fence.”⁵⁷ The show ended with the whole company onstage humming “Silent Night” while the announcer read a copy of a Christmas message that King George VI had broadcast years earlier.⁵⁸ There wasn’t a dry eye in the house.

Given the elaborate sets and costumes he had seen at Kinsaiyok, Parkin was singularly impressed by the costumes the entertainers had scrounged for the production.⁵⁹ Captain Wells, on the other hand, was more amazed by the props and setting: “The ingenuity of the Aussies in constructing the stage props was incredible. They made an excellent horse for a racehorse scene, an operating table, a portable camp fire, wigs made out of coconut husks, beards out of odd bits of rope, and heaven knows what else besides. The curtains were made of blankets and sheets, but in spite of all these make-shift matters, the tout ensemble was perfect, amazingly so.”⁶⁰ (Those who had engaged in cottage industries and arts and crafts were benefitting the concert parties as well.) As a first-time performer, being backstage had been an eye-opener for Wells: “I had no idea of what a hell of a lot of work is involved in back-stage work, what with continuity scripts, prompts, scene-shifting, etc.”⁶¹

Though enthusiastic about the show, Parkin was quite aware it did not meet very high performance standards: “Except for Herb Smith’s voice, nothing was very good but every single item was fully enjoyed.”⁶² Like O’Connor, Parkin felt the Hintok audience was determined to enjoy their Christmas

^{xxv} They had moved down from Hintok Cutting to Hintok River to be close to the river, which made it easier to receive supplies.

^{xxvi} “Fun with Fuck All.” Even in these circumstances it seems official decorum had to be observed.

^{xxvii} Japanese military command for “Attention!”

Day entertainment. High standards could wait.



FIGURE 4.4. SOUVENIR PROGRAM. *FOLLIES DE NOEL*.
STAN MAIN. IWM CR (93.17.1).

Instead of producing something new and different for Christmas at Kinsaiyok, Woodhams stayed with the tried and true, although he did attempt to make the revue, *Follies de Noel*, more elaborate than usual by including a pantomime dame (“Dame Buxton”) and “Gentlemen of the Chorus” joining the “Scala Young Ladies” (see the playbill, **Figure 4.5**, in the Image Gallery). “The Four Pompoms” were the latest iteration of Len Gibson’s singing group, “The Andrew Twisters.”

J. T. Rea, for one, approved Woodhams’ decision. He thought the show “most excellent . . . better than last year.”⁶³ The officer in charge, Colonel Lilly, had successfully convinced the Japanese, fearful the stage lighting would attract Allied bombers, that the Allies would not attack on Christmas, though as Rea drolly noted, “the concert party did their best [to make it happen] by singing ‘The Yanks Are Coming,’ a last war song.”⁶⁴

Witnessing his first “jungle show,” new arrival Geoff O’Conner astutely noted what he thought might be behind the prisoners’ overly exuberant response—an observation that held true for POW audiences in all the other camps as well. “We had to be half queer to enjoy it,” he wrote, “but it was Christmas and everybody was singing his head off, some of them shaking with malaria. But they were all in it. They thought, well, it might be their bloody last.”⁶⁵

Jimmy Walker makes no mention of the Christmas show at Hindato in his memoir. The wave of homesickness that began with the carol singing may have been too overwhelming. But John Barnard thought what they had was “a first-class show. Most of us went to bed feeling much more cheerful than we had for many a long day.”⁶⁶ But he, too, sensed a dis-ease behind the cheerfulness: “If only we could be sure that this is our last Christmas, we should not mind so much, but we are all so tired and fed up with this dirt, heat and general discomfort. . . . The constant lack of food and drugs, in fact living without most of the common necessities of life, is beginning to tell on the spirits of everyone. Hurry up, England, we are getting very tired of it all.”⁶⁷

Pantomimes. Of all the shows produced for Christmas, the pantomimes were the most elaborate, elicited the most laughs, were the most outrageous, and received the most rave reviews.

Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves

The POWs at Aungmyaung were more than ready for Norman Carter's pantomime, *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*. It had been a long wait since their unsatisfactory bit of entertainment in mid-November and expectations were high. As dusk fell and the bonfires on either side of the stage were lit, Carter saw the POWs rush toward the theatre.

From the hospital huts came a stream of men, some with one arm, others with one leg. Those for whom there had been no time to make crutches were carried. If nobody was available to carry them, they crawled crabwise to their allotted space. Ulcer patients hobbled painfully and slowly; men who had been so ravaged with dysentery that their bodies were like skeletons, were carried by their mates.⁶⁸

When Johnny Brandon and his three-piece band hopped into the pit and began the overture, "there were gasps of delighted amazement. They were hearing pop tunes they'd never heard before." Brandon and one of the other musicians had risked their necks, hiding under Commandant Hochi's verandah and listening to the popular American music he played on his gramophone, to produce this surprise for their fellow POWs.⁶⁹

When the curtain parted, the opening scene in the Persian market stunned the audience into momentary silence, soon followed by "crashing applause." It wasn't just the "sinuous Eastern dance" of the "harem ladies" that had taken their breath away, but Frank Brydges' "backdrop showing flat-topped houses lining a narrow street and, towering above them, a golden-domed minaret."⁷⁰ Before the pantomime was over, Ali Baba's donkey, Doins, stole the show.

That donkey got his biggest laugh in the Mountain Pass scene. When the Robber Band was heard getting nearer and nearer, Doins came apart. His forequarters rushed off stage uttering terrified brays, followed by his hind legs with its tail sticking up and quivering with fear.

When at last [Princess] Uneeda's rescuers made their getaway from the Robbers' Cave after Hassan had shouted a triumphant "Open Sesame," the audience whistled and roared its approval. . . . After the show, all mens walked, or were carried, back to their huts, weak with laughter.⁷¹

With *Ali Baba*, Norman Carter proved his worth and was back in Colonel Ramsay's good graces.

Cinderella

The search for entertainers among the POWs in Tarsao had garnered more than “a few” volunteers. A proscenium theatre built by camp engineers stood ready for their first production: the old pantomime favorite, *Cinderella*. The structure’s name, “The New Victory Theatre,” had somehow escaped the Japanese censor’s notice but not the POWs’. With its visible presence and “borehole” rumors about rehearsals, anticipation had reached fever pitch. The performance proved to be worth the wait.

Medical officers Weary Dunlop and “Pop” Vardy, attending the opening performance along with a contingent of Japanese officers and fit POWs, were amazed at what the entertainers had been able to produce from “scratch”: “Proper stage, orchestra, chorus, leading lady, Ugly Sisters, Count, Prince Charming and one long scream of laughter,” observed a delighted Vardy.⁷² Dunlop was astonished at the costuming for the prince’s court. Being a doctor, he spotted the ulcer and scabies scars on the female characters’ legs that momentarily destroyed the illusion.⁷³ For Vardy, it wasn’t only the costumes that caused such pleasure; it was the total effect of all aspects of the production: “Down to the smallest detail—nothing had been forgotten and if it was rough and a wee bittie crude, it was, nevertheless, there. It was smashing.”⁷⁴



FIGURE 4.6. SECRET PHOTOGRAPH OF AUDIENCE AT TARSAO. PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN. IWM 65/143/1. COURTESY OF JUDITH GAWN.

“‘Cinderella’ was a roaring success,” wrote A. G. Allbury. “We hooted with delight at the antics of the ugliest of Ugly Sisters. We whistled appreciatively at the seductive curves of Cinderella—a young Indian Army officer—whose final scene, clasped to the breast of Prince Charming, caused a literal riot.”⁷⁵ The panto was so successful in raising everyone’s spirits—“tears ran down our cheeks and for two hours we forgot all worries and ills,” raved Vardy⁷⁶—that Dunlop requested special permission for a second performance for hospital patients two days later. When that day came, he ordered the sick helped, or carried, to the theatre by their orderlies where they, too, responded. . . . Laughter *was* proving to be the best medicine.

A renewed hopefulness had now become manifest in the camp. “It had not been a noisy or a sophisticated Christmas,” Allbury remarked. “We had eaten the simplest things and drunk nothing stronger

than tea or coffee. We had talked, laughed, sung and prayed together, letting our minds wander and our hearts soften. Each one of us knew that in being here at all he had so very much to be thankful for.”⁷⁸ The Tarsao entertainers had found their legs and hit their mark.

Babes in Thailand

At Takanun, Christmas Day had been declared a full yasume day by Colonel Yanagida. During the afternoon there was a soccer match between the officers and men and a “race meeting” on the riverbank.⁷⁹ After the evening meal came the eagerly awaited pantomime, *Babes in Thailand*.

Given the plot of the pantomime’s inspiration, *Babes in the Woods*—two children (“the babes”) rescued from the clutches of their wicked uncle by Robin Hood and his merry men—it’s not difficult to see why Harffey and Britt chose to adapt this traditional story to their purposes. And if the connections to their own situation weren’t clear, the many topical allusions (a standard practice in a panto) would make them so. As with *Cinderella* at Tarsao, POWs who saw this pantomime as children would now understand it quite differently—and in a way the Japanese censor never imagined while translating the text. According to J. K. Gwinnell, “there was much symbolism read into this production. The Babes were thought to represent the POWs and the ‘Wicked Uncle’ the IJA.”⁸⁰ He might have added that Robin Hood and his merry men symbolized Lord Louis Mountbatten and his Allied South-East Asia Command troops, who would eventually rescue them.

“The atap theatre was an amazing sight,” observed John Coast, as prompter, sitting alongside musical conductor Gus Harffey and the musicians, “the stage lit up by one kerosene lamp,^{xxviii} and the sandy scoop of an orchestra pit illuminated by three little oil lamps from empty pilchard tins, and in front of them an audience of a thousand people sitting around on the natural ledge of the arena, the rear seats looking down from 40 feet above the stage.”⁸¹ On the sandy flat in front of the stage were stretcher cases brought from the hospital by their friends.

“The production was a success from the moment the mosquito-net curtains were lumberingly dragged aside,” Coast boasted.

The first thing was the drunken act of the camp dentist who lay flat on his back in the orchestra pit mumbling and laughing so that all the first rows could hear him; and who, when Ginger [de Wardener] leapt on to the stage in a puff of much rehearsed smoke^{xxix} as the rather sensational and over-weight Fairy Queen, immediately started to shout out: “Look, there’s old Ginger! Ginger!! Ginger!!! Have a radish, Ginger?” and promptly began throwing Chinese radishes up on to the stage. Ginger, before speaking his proper lines, tripped to the front of the stage and whispered to his drunken friend in a voice audible to half the audience, what must have been a quite unique opening line for any show ever put on anywhere—a succinctly stated; “Shut up, you _____t!”⁸²

De Wardener recalled the details of his sensational entrance and its drunken disruption a bit

^{xxviii} Hardie records that the show was lit by two Petroma lamps which Bill Pycock had secured from the Japanese [Hardie, *Diary*, 26 December 1943].

^{xxix} See Chapter 12: “Jolly Good Show!” Part One for how this smoke was produced.

differently:

And I went to the front of the stage. . . . And lying in the front row was a dentist friend of mine, who kept saying, "Have a dildo, Ginger? Have a dildo!" At that time I had no idea what a dildo was—shows how nice I was! No idea at all. But anyhow, he was making a nuisance of himself.

So I went to the front of the stage and I said, "Shut up, you cock!"

And by this time the noise [laughter] was dying down and then I had to say my famous couplet^{xxx}. . . . And it went something like this,

In me you see your Fairy Queen, I used to play Miss Muffet.

But now I have a little wand, don't tell me where to stuff it.

And you know there was absolute silence while I said it. And then there was silence . . . one . . . two . . . three, four. And I thought, "God Almighty, I've [failed]. And then the most enormous explosion of laughter, which relieved me a bit, you see."⁸³

Audio



4.4

John Sharp and G. E. Chippington, who had been sent with others up to Takanun from the hospital at Chungkai to relieve the overcrowding and rejoin their unit, both attended the pantomime but on different evenings. Sharp saw the opening performance on Christmas Day:

very amusing and well-performed pantomime full of topical allusion and jokes and old songs—done by officers mostly, with [lighting] effects supplied by IJA (who were thanked with some hand clapping)—there was a good orchestra. . . . The programme concluded by very special permission from the camp commandant (our old friend Colonel YAMAGIDA [sic]) with the singing of the WILHELMUS and GOD SAVE THE KING sung very lustily indeed—then back to the hospital in the dark to hot coffee and biscuits at 11 pm.⁸⁴

For a select few, the Christmas Day celebration ended not with coffee and biscuits but with something much more potent. Following the opening night performance, a cast party, to which Coast, as prompter, had been invited, was held in the senior medical officer's hut, "where extraordinary things took place, led by the normally dignified S.M.O. [senior medical officer] who set the ball rolling by dancing with the pantomime's leading lady who was there still in her make-up. There was no Lights Out that night, but

^{xxx} A prisoner in Takanun, who had also been a POW in Germany during the First World War, gave this couplet heard in one of their concert parties to de Wardener to speak [De Wardener, Interview, 18].

the force of the home-brew sent everyone soon to bed or to sleep, and shortly after midnight peace reigned once again in Takanun Camp.”⁸⁵

The aftereffects of this cast party had an impact on the performance of the panto the next evening, which Chippington attended. His notes reveal that significant changes in the cast and orchestra had taken place from opening night:

Lively music from Frankie [Quinton] and his accordion heralded the opening of the evening’s entertainment and there, before my very eyes, dancing on tip-toe (or almost tip-toe) across the stage, clad in long white stockings (probably discarded mosquito netting), a short frilly white skirt (ditto), a pair of gauzy wings and a little wand with a glittering star on its tip—no other than Freddie Thompson . . . singing away lustily (in a rather deep voice for a Fairy Queen) as though that mortar bomb had never happened.⁸⁶

Half of Freddie Thompson’s jaw had been blown away by a mortar bomb in the battle for Singapore, yet here he was, taking Hugh de Wardener’s role as the Fairy Queen. And in the orchestra pit, Frankie Quinton had replaced Gus Harffey. What occasioned these changes we don’t know, but perhaps, as Coast suggested, some of the cast members may have partied too long and drank too much the previous evening.

As Chippington watched the show, he ruminated on its effect:

But, as I sat there under that canopy of stars and watched the pantomime, just for a short while I forgot all about the Japanese and the railway, the sweat, the suffering and the pain and those who died. Just a rough and ready, makeshift pantomime by a bunch of amateurs who have probably never performed on a stage before in their whole lives—yet, for a brief moment, in the middle of our dark jungle, they brought us a shaft of light, a breath of freedom.

Afterwards, when I rolled myself in my blanket and settled down to sleep, I found my heart strangely refreshed.^{xxxix}⁸⁷

Chippington’s realization—that when an audience is “taken out” of itself during a performance, a space opens up in which each spectator is “free”—had profound psychological implications for the prisoners.

^{xxxix} Director Leo Britt, who had been a professional actor in West End shows, would have bristled at Chippington’s classification of him as “amateur.”

1944

New Year's Celebrations: "Keep 'em Laughing!"

The Christmas shows had been an enormous success. The problem with success in the theatre is that it raises audience expectations that future shows will be just as good, if not better. Since there was only a week for the entertainers to get their New Year's shows together, those expectations were difficult to fulfill. One factor to take into account was the normal letdown that took place after Christmas was over. With the New Year upon them, the POWs could no longer avoid facing their uncertain future. Laughter and song was a necessary defense against unspoken anxieties. The question for the entertainers now was whether they could "keep 'em laughing."



FIGURE 4.7. SOUVENIR PROGRAM. *HOGMANAY*. STAN MAIN. IWM CR (93.17.1).

At Kinsaiyok, Woodhams and company produced a traditional Scottish *Hogmanay* for their New Year's celebration, delighting the many Highlanders in the camp. But with eighteen variety acts on the bill (including repeats of past "hits") to keep the entertainment going past midnight, it taxed the entertainers' abilities and the audience's patience. Rea, for one, thought the show overly long and "not as good as their Christmas day one."⁸⁸ Even Woodhams' attempt to enliven the long evening with another surprise—"a burlesque fairy dance by the five battalion commanders"^{xxxii}—only momentarily relieved the undercurrent of discontent. Woodhams had convinced the commanders to make fools of themselves to shore up everyone's flagging spirits. And spirits were flagging. "The New Year was welcomed in, in the middle of the show, with surprising little rejoicing," George Wiseman noted.⁸⁹ Two days later, Rea wrote in his diary, "We are glad that 1943 is past. It has been an unhappy year and were well forgotten."⁹⁰

New Year's entertainment at Paya Thanzu Taung had not fared much better. Though still feverish,

^{xxxii} Two British, one Australian, and two Netherland East Indies commanders.

Wim Kan appeared in an afternoon cabaret on New Year's Day but went back to bed immediately afterward. He didn't know it at the time, but this would be his last performance in Burma.

Elsewhere, entertainment sputtered along. Although Jimmy Walker doesn't mention a New Year's Eve or New Year's Day show at Hindato in his memoir, Geoffrey Adams does: a production "made up in bawdiness and high spirits what it lacked in polish, and received a standing ovation—though this may have been due to the fact that there was nothing to sit down on."⁹¹

The Sorrowful Sultan, or What Price Laughter?

At Hintok River the concert party was on a roll and mounted an even more elaborate production on New Year's Day than it had at Christmas. This time it was an original musical comedy, *The Sorrowful Sultan, or What Price Laughter?* The plot about a sultan who had not laughed for thirty years, nor had any of his wives borne him a son, carried a not-so-subtle message for the POWs. Not only had the prisoners experienced difficulties trying to laugh again, but they feared the diseases contracted building the railway, combined with malnutrition, would cause impotence. The court sorcerer promised the sultan that when he laughed again he would also have a son, so a competition (with the princess as the prize) was organized to make the sultan laugh. Those who failed to do so would be put to death.⁹² If laughter was the cure for impotence, this was the show to see.

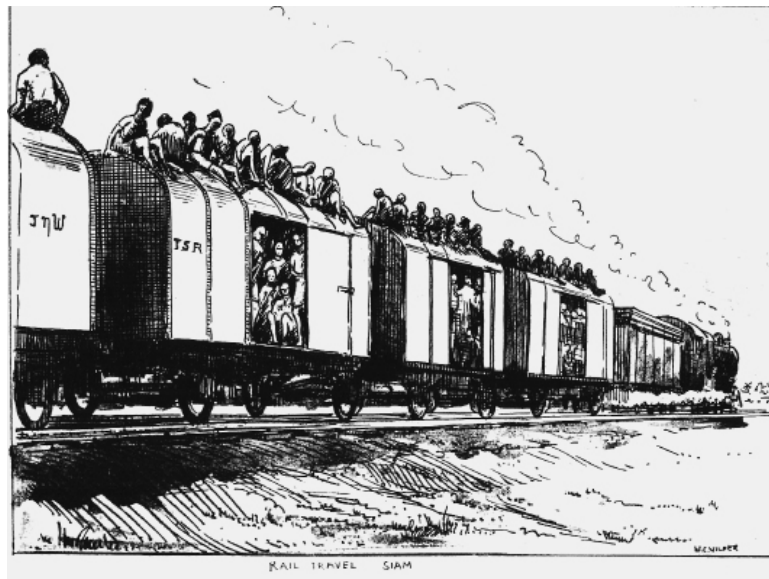


FIGURE 4.8. RAIL TRAVEL SIAM. WILLIAM WILDER. COURTESY OF ANTHONY WILDER.

No New Year's celebrations took place at Aunganaung: the men there had received word that their evacuation to Thailand was imminent. On 27 December, Norman Carter had seen a train rattle by, its cars swarming with I. J. A. troops being sent into Burma in preparation for their coming incursion into India. Four days later, empty cattle trucks were backed onto the siding by the camp, and starting on New Year's Day, all the POWs at Aunganaung were transported by rail over the line they had built to their new base camps in Thailand.⁹³

Redeployment

Once the New Year was past, I. J. A. Southern Command moved to implement the next phase of their plan for the thousands of POWs languishing in the railway camps. Most of them would be evacuated to base hospital and relocation camps in Thailand where they believed they would be rehabilitated before being sent back to Singapore. But others—select groups of “fit” POWs—would be sent overseas to Japan to alleviate the manpower shortage in their home islands.^{xxxiii} Several hundred would remain behind stationed as maintenance parties at key locations along the railway. Among their duties would be repairing damage caused by Allied bombing raids.⁹⁴

Weary Dunlop’s success in reorganizing the Tarsao hospital and implementing a successful rehabilitation scheme had not gone unnoticed. In mid-January, he was ordered by Senior Medical Officer Albert Coates to leave Tarsao to take charge of the large base hospital at Chungkai, whose leadership and organization was a shambles. Dunlop left behind a camp that had made tremendous strides in its welfare program but was still struggling with the enormity of the task.

New Developments

A Touring Cinema Unit

Back on Boxing Day (26 December), Mobile Force No. 1 had moved from Little Nikki down the road to the main camp to await their evacuation orders.⁹⁵ One night shortly after the New Year, Major Jacobs was part of a group of “Japs, Thais, Allied P.O.W.s, and Asiatic coolies of half a dozen nationalities” who were shown “propaganda newsreels and a historical drama” by a “traveling Japanese Cinema Unit.”⁹⁶ Jacobs readily grasped the point of the newsreels but had to rely on translator Bill Drower to understand what the drama was about:

It concerned a famous Japanese warrior of medieval times who was always getting himself involved in duels which inevitably resulted in the death of his opponent. This caused great concern to his future wife and to his aged parents, who finally induced him to give up his duelling and settle down. It was a very boring performance because of the stilted mannerisms of the actors, but it gave some idea of life in medieval Japan.⁹⁷

While Jacobs obviously didn’t think much of the drama, the subject matter of this unidentified example of the Japanese *jidai-geki* (period drama film) is quite remarkable. Japanese audiences would understand that the past was being used to comment on the present. So the fact that the “famous warrior” is “finally induced to give up his dueling and settle down” and not spurred on to greater glory fighting against his enemies could be read as a radical shift in attitude about the Pacific War. Was this *jidai-geki* film preparing its audience for the future?

^{xxxiii} At this point, the “select group” would be “white” POWs only. The Japanese had a racial purity policy and did not want dark-skinned POWs, such as might be found in the Volunteer Forces or the N.E.I., sent to Japan. Later, when they became more desperate for workers, this policy would shift.

Tarsao Redoubles Its Efforts

The large number of heavy sick and fit POWs that continued to crowd into Tarsao prompted the concert party to operate two separate producing organizations—"The Tarsao Musical Comedy Show" and "The Tarsao Dramatic Society." Since they had distinct audiences to cater to, they built separate theatres: the "Hospital Theatre" and the "Lines Theatre." Each group alternated its weekly appearance between these two venues.⁹⁸

The Tarsao Dramatic Society adapted fiction and plays into radio dramas that stimulated audiences' imaginations. One of these was *Mutiny on the Bounty*. "One thought of uniforms of the day, a sailing ship's deck, men being flogged, breadfruit plants being soaked with water," wrote F. W. G. Power. "How wrong can you be—there was none of that. The audience sat on the ground and watched, or rather, listened to a screen of matting. In the matting, holes had been cut out against which the players held a megaphone."⁹⁹

The Tarsao Musical Comedy Show, on the other hand, performed works such as *Café Metropoll* and Noel Gay's 1937 cockney musical *Me and My Girl*. "Pop" Vardy treasured these musical comedies because of their positive effect on the morale of his hospital patients—and on his own as well: "You would have to see these shows to appreciate their 'wonderfulness.' First the girls—they just stagger me—'Judy' performed by a Pte Cullen just carries us away with her smashing way until, bump—we come down to earth—she has lifted her dress just a wee bit too high. . . . Some of our 'asides' to the male-'come'-female charms are best left out of, even this Chronicle."¹⁰⁰

An Aside

The Tarsao female impersonators were obviously good. Arthur Johnston witnessed one instance of their attraction offstage:

Going back to camp from work (collecting wood) coming past parade ground I suddenly saw an English girl all done up, prancing across the ground in very high shoes. Nicely dressed, big breasts and well done up. Gave me quite a start, and had to stop and look and really think. Finally woke up that it was one of the "female impersonators" returning from a practice. However "she" had been sighted by two of the guards who rushed down, made rude signs, and turned very nasty when "she" refused to accompany them to their hut. To their dismay one of their officers came along, who happened to know the impersonator and the guards had the indignity of being stood to attention and their faces thoroughly slapped whilst "missey," as they protested, continued across the ground to his quarters.^{xxxiv101}

But Vardy reported that a few officers thought the female impersonators' appearance and behavior offstage offensive:

^{xxxiv} The Japanese officer's respect for the female impersonator may reflect his appreciation of the *onnagata* (female impersonator) tradition in the Kabuki theatre back home.

The Camp is divided over these female impersonators—some of them seem to have taken their “art” too serious, having shaved their eyebrows off and allowed their hair to pass even the worst soldier’s standard. We in the hospital are a bit removed from the main scenes but we hear that one or two “very fierce soldiers” don’t like seeing their brother officers with curlers in their hair each morning or their eyebrows shaved and shaded foreheads and mincing ways—most unsoldier-like—I agree but hardly worth the tempers that would appear to have been displayed and certain remarks passed.¹⁰²

“Suffering . . . Will Cloud the Brain in Excess”

Even with elaborate rehabilitative schemes and the best efforts of entertainers, conditions at Tarsao continued to be squalid. A recently arrived J. K. Gale protested, “Tasao [*sic*] is a frightful dump. There are 3,000 men here and 2,000 of them are in hospital. Half of the hospital huts are falling down and the squalor is only comparable to that of the worst depression squatters camps shown in American films. Everyone here looks dirty in body and clothing. . . . There is hardly a person in the camp who hasn’t got scabies. . . . The sooner I get out of Tasao the happier I shall be.”¹⁰³ What Gale didn’t take into account is that everyone in Tarsao, including the administrative and medical staff, was struggling to survive.

“Pop” Vardy’s medical report for the month of January lists thirty-six deaths in the camp and four medical officers bed-sick with amoebic dysentery. In a moment of despair about the situation he cried out, “Almost two years and oh My God, how I long for it to end but when, oh when, will it?”¹⁰⁴ Three days later while reading John Gunther’s book *Inside Asia*, Vardy came across a passage by the Indian politician Jawaharlal Nehru (composed while he, too, was in prison), in which he wrote, “suffering, even if it may be necessary for clear thought, will cloud the brain in excess.” And he thought, “This is what, I think, has happened to so many of my patients. In no other way can I account for the change in so many of them—not their physical but their mental change. If these men were once A1 British soldiers, it is the only answer ‘Suffering’ . . . Oh God. Stop it all.”¹⁰⁵

As a medical officer, Vardy could work on shoring up his patients’ physical health. But a more difficult task lay in restoring their dulled sensibilities and minds clouded by prolonged trauma. Forced inactivity, with its long stretches of boredom, could affect them adversely as well. Johnston’s comments that he “had to stop and look and really think” and that he “finally woke up” confirm Vardy’s observation on the POWs’ mental acuity. Though entertainment coupled with cottage industries and arts and craft projects were proving their worth in the POWs’ recovery process, the healing would take time.

Meanwhile, Gale would not have long to wait for his evacuation from Tarsao. By the beginning of March, all the POWs at Tarsao were sent down the line to hospital or transit camps on the plains.

“Hurry Up and Wait”

Knowing they were soon to be evacuated made the waiting all the more difficult. Although “Hurry up and wait” was standard military procedure, it increased anxiety about the uncertainties, and the challenge to find new ways to keep themselves entertained became acute. As the days wore on, entertainers in three camps aimed to distract the men from their anxieties.

The performers at Hintok River once again proved they were up to the task. In late January, they

followed the success of their New Year's Day show with another, more spectacular original production, *Kannibal Kapers*. During the interval, they had relocated their theatre to a new and better site, "at the foot of the rocky hill which . . . [made] a natural amphitheatre for seating above the stage."¹⁰⁶



FIGURE 4.9. SETTING FOR *KANNIBAL KAPERS*. COURTESY OF RAY PARKIN.

Parkin's sketch and description of the setting for *Kannibal Kapers* shows that the abilities of the concert party's design and technical staff had continued to grow:

In the centre of the stage, stood the great god Ju-Ju, with the sacrificial pot in front of him.

Ju-Ju is cut from the trunk of a kapok tree, with the sap still in it. But already he has a life of his own. He is complete, with belly and breasts and prominent navel. His hollowed-out eye sockets are lit from behind with two slush lamps which also smoke and add to the supernatural effect. The arms are hinged to raise with each solemn and spine-chilling proclamation.¹⁰⁷

Though scenic effects had improved, Parkin thought the plot for *Kannibal Kapers* needed more work: "Javanese Dutch took the parts of natives and concubines. . . . The witch doctor and his rival were the comics, intriguing to get each other boiled and eaten. For the rest, it was a musical which gave the Javanese a chance to sing many of their fine songs."^{xxxv108}

While watching the show, Parkin became attuned to a different perception of what the concert party activity might be about. "There was something about this international flavour of the show that affected us all," he mused. "And we talked about it when we got back to our tents. The harmony of people together: the theatre and make-believe seems to be an important thing to humanity—particularly in primitive states."¹⁰⁹

^{xxxv} From our point of view, casting the dark-skinned Javanese POWs in the "cannibal" and "female" roles is a blatant example of racial stereotyping and sexualization of the Asian "other." But in 1944 no concept of color-blind casting or queer theory existed, and these practices were accepted as the norm.

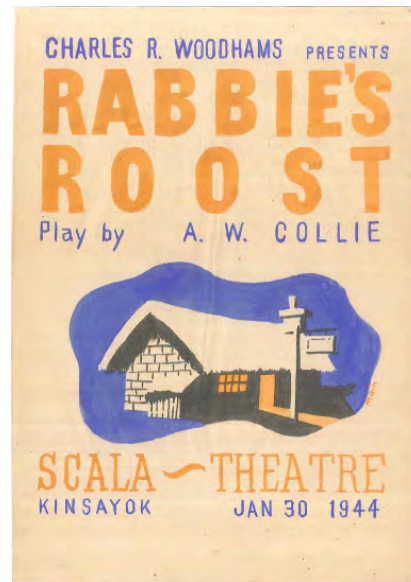


FIGURE 4.10. SOUVENIR PROGRAM. *RABBIE'S ROOST*.
STAN MAIN. IWM CR (93.17.1).

Given the poor reception of his last production at Kinsaiyok, Woodhams knew he had to produce something other than another revue if he wanted to keep audiences coming. At the end of January he presented an original play: *Rabbie's Roost* written by A. W. Collie (inspired by poems of Robert Burns). Though labeled a play, the cast list of nine principals, a chorus of farmers, farmer's wives, Highland dancers, and a fiddler, Jock Smith, is more appropriate for a musical comedy. *Rabbie's Roost* is the production in which Woodhams made his first known appearance as a female impersonator. And another new face, Ken Adams, would soon become a major female impersonator in shows at Nakhon Pathom hospital camp.

At the beginning of February, Gus Harffey and Leo Britt opened their revue, *Takanun Topics*, at Takanun. John Sharp found it "very amusing in spite of rehearsal difficulties."¹¹⁰ What the "difficulties" were is not made clear, but given later events at Chungkai, it wouldn't be surprising to know that Britt and Harffey were having trouble working together. Following the performance, there were more difficulties with the show's "topical" content: "Nips are said to have taken umbrage at references to the progress of the war in our shows," wrote Sharp, "and there is a rumour that they have been banned."¹¹¹ The rumor proved false, but the incident served as a warning for the entertainers to be on their guard.

A Promenade Concert of Popular Classical Music

As in other places, the influx of new POWs into Takanun greatly benefited the concert party. Among the recent arrivals was professional musical conductor Ernest Lenthall, ARCM,^{xxxvi} bandmaster of the Cambridgeshires Regimental Band, and some of his musicians. Capitalizing on this godsend, Leo Britt produced *A Promenade Concert of Popular Classical Music* on 5 February, with Lenthall conducting "The Beach Pavilion Light Orchestra." There was even a souvenir program for sale for ten cents.

^{xxxvi} Associate of the Royal College of Music.

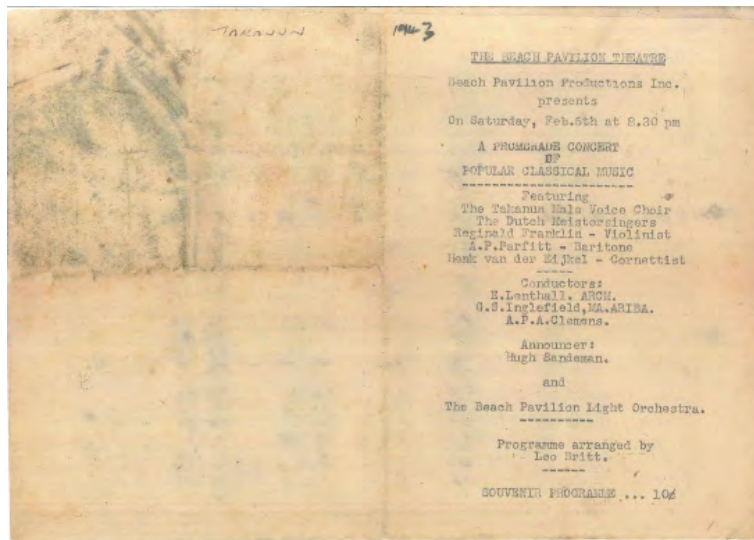


FIGURE 4.11. SOUVENIR PROGRAM. *A PROMENADE CONCERT*. IWM 9387/99/82/1.

For this remarkable jungle concert Britt brought together all the British and Dutch musicians in the camp to sing and play an astonishing collection of light classical pieces (see the program of music at **Figure 4.12** in the Image Gallery).¹¹² Such a concert was possible because musicians, in addition to protecting their instruments, had either preserved their precious scores throughout the construction period or managed to remember them.

Farewell Shows

Now that evacuations of POWs from Burma were well under way, those in Thailand soon followed. Many romusha were also moved down the line at this time, collected together in larger camps where they were left to survive on their own. There was little, if any, attempt by the Japanese to repatriate them. At Paya Thanzu Taung, Wim Kan had remained seriously ill with repeated attacks of malaria throughout January and February. At the beginning of March he was evacuated by rail, along with 140 other chronically ill men, to Kanburi Hospital camp in Thailand.¹¹³

Since Takanun was located at the upper end of the Thai side of the railway, it was among the first of the Thailand camps slated for evacuation. Those chosen for the overseas Japan Party had been given a farewell religious service and sing-along before they left.¹¹⁴ But before they were sent down the line, Harffey and Britt were determined to present the show that was in rehearsal. Doing so would give them something more than a sing-along to mark their departure: it would be a glorious farewell show.

Animal Crackers was produced by Carl Moser on 27 February. His rewrite was of a show originally written for the Marx Brothers that had, in England, starred “The Crazy Gang,” a group of six farceurs. Coast, who had been promoted to stage manager for this production, thought it “one of the best shows ever put on in our captivity.” But the “most lasting thing in the show” was “a parody of *These Foolish Things*” that had somehow snuck by their “lax and lazy Nip censor.” In expectation of their impending evacuation to Singapore, the parody was meant to be a farewell to Thailand and the whole wretched railway construction experience.

*The high embankment where the Railway Trace is,
The blasted cuttings through the rocky places,
Mosquitoes whirring wings, these crazy things
Mean Thailand to you.*

*The rain of May that made the camp a plaster,
The senseless shouting: 'Speedo! Speedo! Faster!!'
Those Buggairero-ings, these crazy things
Mean Thailand to you.*

*We worked and slaved on rice and tea,
When you did that to us we ached and prayed that we might be free.*

*The work in boiling sun for half a nickel —
But Rolex watches fetch a hundred Tikal,
And as for signet rings:^{xxxvii} these crazy things
Mean Thailand to you.*

*The prophylactic dose of tasty quinine,
The aromatic whiff of nearby latrine,
Bed bugs, the stinking things, these crazy things
Mean Thailand to you.*

*We worked in mud just like a sea,
When we came up in May we never knew that this had to be.*

*A cigarette that bears the Red Cross traces,
A bale of shorts hid in sandy places,^{xxxviii}
Those petty pilferings, these crazy things
Mean Thailand to you.*

*The blunted needles for inoculations,
The agonies of jungle ulcerations,*

^{xxxvii} Personal items sold to have money to buy special eats in canteens.

^{xxxviii} Refers to an incident where a bundle of army shorts had been stolen and hidden in a sandbank.

Oh how the Blue Stone stings!!^{xxxix}

These crazy things mean Thailand to you.^{xl15}

At the close of the show—their last in Takanun—the audience of POWs “just stood up and cheered for minutes.”¹¹⁶ Two days later the final round of their evacuations down the line to Chungkai began.

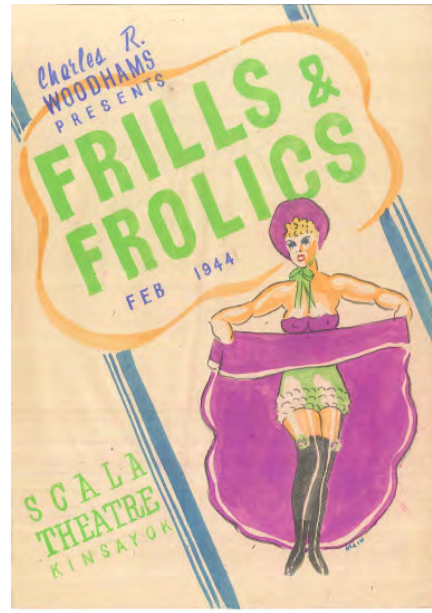


FIGURE 4.13. SOUVENIR PROGRAM. *FRILLS & FROLICS*. STAN MAIN. IWMCR (93.17.1).

For the final show at Kinsaiyok, *Frills & Frolics*, Woodhams reverted once again to a revue format. Though the program cover shows a buxom blonde cancan dancer lifting her skirts to show off her ruffled undergarments, there is no indication on the playbill that a cancan ever took place, unless it was part of the finale. If it had not, Woodhams’ audience would have let him know about it.

This will be the last we hear of Charles Woodhams, Reginald Dixon, Bill James, and the other performers (except for Ken Adams and Len Gibson) in this extraordinary jungle concert party. At Tamuang, their new base camp, Gale reported that severe restrictions were placed on concert party activity: “There is to be no whistling or singing at any time, even at concerts. The only concerts allowed are to be on the Yasume [*sic*] day and then must consist only of band music. Plays, songs and humorists are completely forbidden.”¹¹⁷ These constraints put an end to any further ambitions Woodhams might have had.

For those at Hindato, their departure could not come soon enough. Since the New Year’s holiday, there had been little for them to look forward to as their entertainers exhausted their repertoire of songs and sketches and fell back on repetition of old material. As the concert party struggled on, “hopeless miserable monotony” returned full force. In a series of terse and caustic observations, Jimmy Walker summed up the

^{xxxix} “Bluestone” was copper sulfate crystals rubbed on raw ulcers to cauterize the flesh [N. Smith, 32].

^{xl} The absence in the lyrics of any word about the disease, brutality, and death that happened on the railway speaks volumes. No one could bear to be reminded of those.

reality of their daily life:

Sheer monotony. Each day and night one conversed with one's mate until anecdotes once interesting became with repetition, boring and a new mate sought.

The mutual loathing of one's kind that is born of long and forced association in crowded conditions was a prominent portion of our torment.

Some entertained on makeshift stages partly for the amusement of their fellows and partly as a prop to their own sanity.¹¹⁸

These realities would not go away until the men were finally liberated.

* * *

And so end the “jungle shows” in the Up Country camps along the Thailand-Burma railway—that is, until further entertainment is performed in maintenance camps in late 1944 and early 1945. Stalwart entertainers had performed everywhere and anywhere they could: around campfires; in huts; on flattened anthills, stacks of sleepers, and open-air stages; and even—when time, abilities, and resources allowed—in proscenium theatres. The music and laughter had given many the courage to live another day. The productions put on following completion of the railway—sing-alongs, variety and radio shows, minstrel shows, revues, pantomimes, promenade concerts—are characterized by a phenomenal resurgence of creativity after months of suppression. Over and over, the POWs who witnessed these jungle shows were awed not only by their fellow prisoners’ performances but by the ability of the producers, designers, and technicians to devise musical and theatrical productions out of little more than “memories, imaginations, and natural inventiveness.”¹¹⁹ Everyone knew what a remarkable achievement it was for them all, stuck for months in the middle of nowhere.

Actually, it was only a foreshadowing of greater things to come. The hospital and relocation camps to which they were headed would present the entertainers with new opportunities and new challenges to test their abilities to keep hope alive.

Endnotes

- 1 Woodhams, IWM CR (93.17.1).
- 2 Coast, 146.
- 3 Hardie, Diary, 20? October 1943.
- 4 Bancroft, 108.
- 5 Bancroft, 108–110 passim.
- 6 Rivett, 300.
- 7 Dunlop, Diary, 22 November 1943.
- 8 Hastain, 156–157.
- 9 Hastain, 157.
- 10 Hastain, 157.
- 11 Hastain, 156–157.
- 12 Peacock, 213.

- 13 Coast, 156–157.
- 14 Peacock, 213.
- 15 Coast, 156.
- 16 Richardson, Diary, 11 December 1943.
- 17 De Wardener, Interview, 13–16.
- 18 Carter, 146.
- 19 Carter, 147.
- 20 Carter, 147–153 *passim*.
- 21 Wood-Higgs, Diary, 10 November 1943.
- 22 Wood-Higgs, Diary, 10 November 1943.
- 23 Kan, Diary, 31 October 1943.
- 24 Kan, Diary, 14 November 1943.
- 25 Kan, Diary, 14 November 1943.
- 26 Kan, Diary, 26 October 1943.
- 27 Kan, Diary, 14 November 1943.
- 28 Walker, *Of Rice*, 41.
- 29 Walker, Interview, 16–17.
- 30 Rea, Diary, 21 November 1943.
- 31 Rea, Diary, 22 November 1943.
- 32 Wiseman, Diary, 28 November 1943.
- 33 Rea, Diary, 22 November 1943.
- 34 Woodhams, IWM CR (93.17.1).
- 35 Wiseman, Diary, 28 November 1943.
- 36 Parkin, *Into the Smother*, 231.
- 37 Kan, Diary, 19 November 1943.
- 38 Jacobs, 95.
- 39 Kan, Diary, 19 November 1943.
- 40 Jacobs, 95.
- 41 Quoted in Hall, *The Blue Haze*, 277–278.
- 42 Kan, Diary, 30 November 1943.
- 43 Jordon, 78–79.
- 44 Quiller-Couch, ed., *The Oxford Book of English Verse: 1250-1900*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940.
- 45 Whittaker, Interview, 1.
- 46 Kan, Diary, 30 November 1943.
- 47 Kan, Diary, 30 November 1943.
- 48 Kan, Diary, 15 December 1943.
- 49 Jacobs, 97–98.
- 50 Trans. by Margie Bellamy.
- 51 Coast, 163.
- 52 Alexander, 157.
- 53 Walker, *Of Rice*, 44–45.
- 54 Wells, Memoir, 226.
- 55 Wells, Memoir, 228.
- 56 Parkin, *Into the Smother*, 239–240.
- 57 Parkin, *Into the Smother*, 239–240.
- 58 Wells, Memoir, 229.
- 59 Parkin, *Into the Smother*, 239–240.
- 60 Wells, Memoir, 228–229.
- 61 Wells, Memoir, 228–229.
- 62 Parkin, *Into the Smother*, 239–240.
- 63 Rea, Diary, 26 December 1943.

- 64 Rea, Diary, 26 December 1943.
- 65 O'Connor, quoted in Nelson, *Japanese Prisoners*, 43–44.
- 66 Barnard, 133.
- 67 Barnard, 134.
- 68 Carter, 161–162.
- 69 Carter, 162.
- 70 Carter, 162–163.
- 71 Carter, 162–163.
- 72 Vardy, Diary, 26 December 1943.
- 73 Dunlop, Diary, 25 December 1943.
- 74 Vardy, Diary, 26 December 1943.
- 75 Allbury, 109.
- 76 Vardy, Diary, 26 December 1943.
- 77 Dunlop, Diary, 27 December 1943.
- 78 Allbury, 108–109.
- 79 Hardie, Diary, 24 December 1943.
- 80 Gwinnell, "Christmas in Captivity: Three Memorable Days on the Railroad of Death," British Association of Malaya, *MALAYA Magazine* (Jan. 1958): n.p. [quoted in Moffart e-mail, 28 July 2003].
- 81 Coast, 159.
- 82 Coast, 159–160.
- 83 De Wardener, Interview, 17–19.
- 84 John Sharp, Diary, 25 December 1943.
- 85 Coast, 160.
- 86 Chippington, 309.
- 87 Chippington, 310.
- 88 Rea, Diary, 2 January 1944.
- 89 Wiseman, Diary, 1 January 1944.
- 90 Rea, Diary, 2 January 1944.
- 91 Adams, 116.
- 92 Parkin, *Into the Smother*, 244–245.
- 93 Carter, 163.
- 94 Richards, *The Survival Factor*, 106.
- 95 Jacobs, 100.
- 96 Jacobs, 101–102.
- 97 Jacobs, 101–102.
- 98 Vardy, Diary, 29 January 1944.
- 99 Vardy, Diary, 29 January 1944; Power, 89.
- 100 Vardy, Diary, 29 January 1944.
- 101 Johnston, Diary, 7 January 1944.
- 102 Vardy, Diary, 29 January 1944.
- 103 Gale, Diary, 15? February, 1944.
- 104 Vardy, Diary, 31 January 1944.
- 105 Vardy, Diary, 3 February 1944.
- 106 Parkin, *Into the Smother*, 254.
- 107 Parkin, *Into the Smother*, 254.
- 108 Parkin, *Into the Smother*, 255.
- 109 Parkin, *Into the Smother*, 255.
- 110 John Sharp, Diary, 20 February 1944.
- 111 John Sharp, Diary, 21 February 1944.
- 112 Pearce, J. A., IWM 9387/99/82/1.
- 113 Kan, Diary, 5 March 1944.

- 114 John Sharp, Diary, 21 February 1944.
- 115 Coast, 164–165.
- 116 Coast, 166.
- 117 Gale, Diary, 21 July 1944.
- 118 Walker, *Of Rice*, 50.
- 119 Hastain, 156–157.

Chapter 5: “The Tamarkan Players Present”

Tamarkan Convalescent Camp

It was early December 1943 when Brigadier General Arthur Varley and the first remnants of A Force from Burma arrived at their designated convalescent camp in Tamarkan, Thailand, after a long journey by rail. As their train traversed the wooden bridges and viaducts built by their counterparts, they passed the construction camps where the POWs in Thailand anxiously awaited their own redeployment back to base camps. When they entered Tamarkan, they found a well-ordered camp with a lean-to theatre left by the previous occupants.

Backstory: October 1942–November 1943

Tamarkan was “the bridge camp”—the one made famous by David Lean’s film *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, based on the novel by Pierre Boulle.ⁱ There were, in fact, two bridges built at Tamarkan: first a wooden one for pedestrian and motor vehicle traffic that served as a temporary railway trace until the permanent concrete and steel railway bridge could be completed just upriver of it. These bridges crossed the River Kwai only in Boulle’s imagination. The river they actually crossed was the Mae Khlong.

Tamarkan camp was established early in October 1942 by British POWs under the command of Philip Toosey, a British lieutenant-colonel in the Territorial Army. Immediately upon arrival, Toosey was ordered to have his troops start construction of two bridges over the Mae Khlong. Knowing that to resist would be futile if not fatal for his men, he obeyed.

With the POWs’ time and energy focused on bridge construction, only a few impromptu entertainments were performed in Tamarkan during late 1942 and early 1943. In February 1943, a thousand Netherlands East Indies POWs arrived to supplement the British labor force, and the wooden bridge was completed later that month. One of their number was Frank Samethini, brother of the accordionist, Han, who was working elsewhere on the railway.

As the steel bridge neared completion under the newly imposed “Speedo” regimen, Toosey reported that “the majority of the fit men were moved further up the line for more work.”¹ Tamarkan was then converted into a hospital camp, where heavy sick from up country work sites could receive better medical care, be rehabilitated, and then be sent back up the line to work. The first of these seriously ill POWs to arrive in Tamarkan were not Toosey’s own troops but from Groups II and IV who were kept overnight and then passed on to their base hospital camp at Chungkai across the river. Jack Chalker was one of the heavy sick in these groups.

The Singapore Entertainers

Also in one of these early groups were Captain “Fizzer” Pearson and his “handful of cockney jokers”: Bobby Spong, Sam Drayton, Eric Griffiths-Jones, and other former members of “The Mumming Bees” concert party last seen in Kanyu in late February. Chaim Nussbaum, an American army chaplain in Tamarkan, noted that the entertainers’ arrival caused considerable excitement:

ⁱ For more about the relationships between the book, the film, and the reality, see Julie Summers’ *The Colonel of Tamarkan* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2005).

The Singapore camp theatre, comprised of a group of POWs who have been kept together (by the British camp office), is here and is being revived by great demand, because there are so many men with nothing to do while they wait for the inevitable call to join the slave gangs on the Japanese rail-building and bridge-building crews.²

As members of Group IV, “Fizzer” Pearson and his troupe should have been sent on to Chungkai, but with the sudden influx of desperately sick men from up country, Chungkai had become vastly overcrowded and could take no more POWs until additional huts had been built for their accommodation. The “Singapore entertainers,” therefore, had to remain at Tamarkan.

In answer to the urgent need to provide some sort of entertainment for the bored and apathetic prisoners, a lean-to theatre was built, though the “Singapore entertainers” were only allowed to perform once a fortnight.

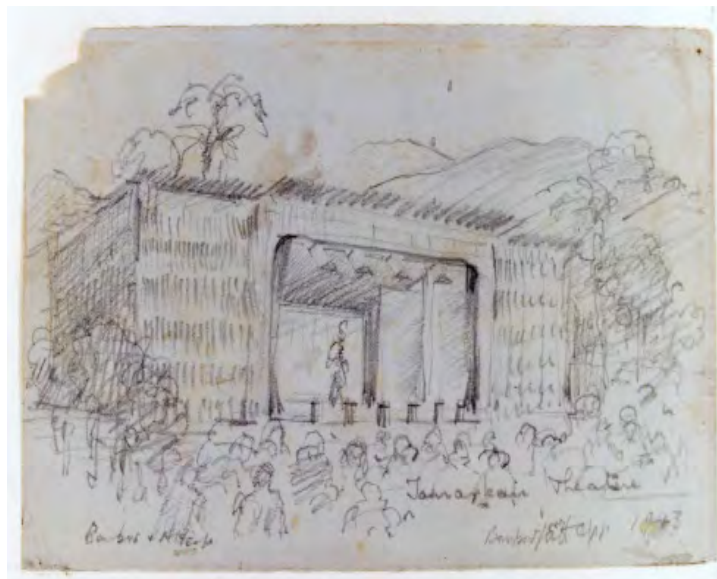


FIGURE 5.1. “TAMARKAN THEATRE 1943.” JACK CHALKER. COURTESY OF JACK CHALKER.

Jack Chalker, who revisited Tamarkan from Chungkai sometime in the late autumn of 1943, drew a sketch of the theatre. It shows a fairly large, sophisticated structure made of bamboo and atap thatching with a raised stage, a proscenium arch, and a slanted shed-like roof. The interior of the stagehouse had fixed wings, front draw curtains (shown pulled to the side), stage lighting, and off-stage spaces. A performer stands on stage, giving us a better understanding of the theatre’s size.ⁱⁱ

Frank Samethini described a typical show put on by the “Singapore entertainers”:

As always, tonight’s show will feature the “Incomparable Bobby.” . . . In most

ⁱⁱ Since Australian Major Jim Jacobs, entertainment officer for the Australians who took over the camp in 1944, stated that they were responsible for devising the lighting for this “cowshed” theatre, it is very possible that Chalker’s sketch should really be dated 1944 instead of 1943. This would be more consistent with his misdating of his Chungkai theatre sketches.

cases the script requires a young frivolous wench caught in a web of naughty innuendo or straight out dirty jokes applauded by a roaring audience.

We are seated on jute-bags in front of the stage. The curtains are closed. The show is about to start. The band is playing “Stardust”. . . . The curtain goes up.ⁱⁱⁱ Bobbie [sic] appears swaying his hips amidst catcalls. . . . Afterwards we all silently retire, full of renewed solidarity and nostalgia.^{iv3}

Spong also thought it his duty to perform in the hospital wards for those who could not attend the theatre. From the many references to “Bobby” in the POW diaries and memoirs, it is clear the majority of the men adored him and the “glamour” he was willing to contribute to their otherwise miserably dull lives (see more about Bobby Spong in Chapter 14: “Somebody Had to Put a Skirt On”).

Nussbaum talked to the performers after a show:

“We have performed too many eulogies since the war started,” one of the young actors told me.

Still, the troupe is full of enthusiasm and they say they are relieved to play for an audience that remembers how and when to laugh.⁴

This last observation reveals the terrible state of the POWs’ mental abilities and morale in the up country work camps during “the Speedo.”

Toosey’s Troops Return

By May, the steel bridge had been completed and was taking rail traffic. Now that the I. J. A. and their POW workers at Tamarkan were “relieved from the unbearable pressure” of their “Speedo” deadlines, the attitude and behavior of the Japanese toward the POWs changed from one of harsh discipline to one of near amiability.⁵ “Concerts took place once a week,” John Cosford observed, noting the change. “After the hopeless, dispiriting experience of disease and death, the comparative cheerfulness was a great tonic to us.”⁶

When the desperately ill among Toosey’s own troops—those sent up the line on work crews earlier—began arriving back at Tamarkan. He was shocked by their condition:

As a typical example I can remember one man who was so thin that he could be lifted easily in one arm. His hair was growing down his back and was full of maggots; his clothing consisted of a ragged pair of shorts soaked with dysentery excreta; he was lousy and covered with flies all the time. He was so weak that he was unable to lift his hand to brush away the flies which were clustered on his eyes, and on the sore places of his body.⁷

ⁱⁱⁱ *Figuratively speaking; in actuality, pulled aside.*

^{iv} *Original source has been reordered for clarity.*



FIGURE 5.2. “REST FROM THE RAILROAD . . .” JAN VAN HOLTHE. COURTESY OF NORMAN PRITCHARD.

Jan van Holthe, the young Dutch artist seen at Rin Tin, was among those returned to Tamarkan at this time. His pencil sketch, “Rest from the Railroad . . .,” drawn at Tamarkan, confirms the horrors of the scene Toosey so vividly describes.

Journey’s End

On 27 July, “Fizzer” Pearson’s company mounted a production of R. C. Sherriff’s First World War drama *Journey’s End*. Nussbaum was impressed with the relevance of its “message” for the POWs at Tamarkan:

Tonight, they performed *Journey’s End*, a saddening play about a young officer during World War I who arrives as a novice on the front in France. Enthusiastically, he pioneers a new bond of equality between officers and privates, and he dies in a mood of melancholy in the evening of that very first day in the command bunker.

The audience is grateful and deeply touched, apparently identifying with this soldier’s story.⁸

To produce *Journey’s End* in this setting was an extraordinary gamble. It is a serious play about soldiers obeying orders to defend the British lines against a major attack by German forces; the soldiers know full well it will bring about their deaths. With its tragic ending, it was not the usual fare for recovering POWs, who, it was thought, needed songs and laughter. Perhaps the rationale for its production was its political importance more than its entertainment value.

One of Colonel Toosey’s goals as POW commandant at Tamarkan was to foster an atmosphere

of “equality” between the officers and other ranks in his camp. To encourage this camaraderie, he refused to allow a separate officers’ mess and had all men eat together—a move not appreciated by officers in the regular army.⁹ That Nussbaum understood the theme of *Journey’s End* as pioneering “a new bond of equality between the officers and privates” is an interpretation that fits well with Toosey’s scheme. And Nussbaum’s claim that the audience identified with the young soldier and found the play deeply moving is also telling. Only a year and a half earlier, these men had, like the soldiers in the play, been ordered into the losing battles for Malaya and Singapore and witnessed the death of many of their comrades.^v

In late November, Toosey received orders to evacuate Tamarkan so it could be converted into a convalescent camp for A Force POWs arriving from Burma. Toosey’s heavy sick were sent to the hospital at Chungkai, and he, together with his light sick and fit troops, was relocated to the supply depot and maintenance facility at Nong Pladuk, where he would take over command. During these relocations, the “Singapore entertainers” returned to their base camp at Chungkai. There they would rejoin others from the original Mumming Bees troupe.¹⁰

By the end of November/early December, Tamarkan awaited its new arrivals.

The Australians Take Charge

Responsibility for providing some sort of Christmas entertainment for the few remaining British and N.E.I. troops and the newly arrived A Force POWs now fell to the Australian entertainers. As the secret radio operators and concert party producers Les Bullock and Bob Skilton were part of Brigadier General Varley’s headquarters contingent, it is very likely these two arranged to put on the pantomime *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in their inherited lean-to theatre. Like *So Tite and the Little Twerps*—the parody of *Snow White* performed, coincidentally, across the river at Chungkai for their Christmas—the Tamarkan production was filled, no doubt, with covert allusions to their enslavement by “the dwarfs,” a frequent derisive comment made by the taller Australians on the smaller stature of their captors.

The Burma Entertainers

On New Year’s Day 1944, there were further arrivals of POWs from Burma: members of Ramsay Force, including Norman Carter and the entertainers who had formed part of his concert parties in Burma. Their leader, Lieutenant-Colonel George Ramsay, was designated by General Varley as the officer in charge of the Australian section of the camp.

On 13 January, Major Jim Jacobs arrived in Tamarkan with Anderson Force. The following day, Colonel Ramsay sent for him. “He wanted me to take charge of entertainment for the troops, and to get a concert party under way,” explained Jacobs. “There were nearly three thousand British and Australian and some American troops in camp, and this provided a good field for talent, although at least 25 to 30 per cent of the men were sick in hospital.”¹¹

Jacobs *would* find a “good field” of talent from which to produce his shows. It would include Jim Anderson, Val Ballantyne, Les Bullock, Norman Carter, Pat Fox, Sid “Happy” Marshall, Wally McQueen, “Poodles” Norley, Bob Skilton, Jack Turner, Ted Weller, set designer/scenic artist Frank Brydges, costumer Frank Purtell, and Norman Whittaker with his brass band—and Tony Gerrish with his dance band. Other

^v The context in which a play is produced can change everything in terms of an audience’s reception. When *Journey’s End* was performed back in Changi POW Camp by the 18th Divisional Headquarters Players on the first anniversary of their captivity, it had received mixed reviews: their British audience had been moved by it, but their Australian audience—still smarting with deep resentment from their defeat and surrender caused, they believed, by the incompetence of the British military leaders—totally rejected its “message” of solidarity among the ranks and cheered, instead, the appearance of the captured German soldier (D. Smith, 62).

talented POW entertainers would also be found.

This is the first word we have of Tony Gerrish and his dance band, but they may have been the band mentioned by Frank Samethini performing for the “Singapore entertainers,” or, perhaps, they were the musical ensemble that played for Skilton and Bullock’s shows at Thanbyuzayat. Gerrish was an Englishman, and two members of his band were Americans, sailors in the U.S. Navy who were rescued when their ship, the U.S.S. *Houston*, was torpedoed and sunk. Navy bandmaster G. L. Galyean played the flugelhorn; Petty Officer 3rd Class Wilbur G. Smith played the bass viol, albeit a “jungle style” version made out of a wooden box with a bamboo upright and a single piece of signal wire as a “string.” It could only be plucked, not bowed.

With this collection of producers and performers together in the same camp, extraordinary things were about to take place in the entertainment world at Tamarkan.

Carter Tests the Waters

Jacobs first produced a series of variety shows. When Norman Carter saw them in what he called the “lean-to shack” of a theatre, he thought they were quite poor, evidenced by the fact that they were not drawing audiences. He thought Jacobs an excellent performer but not a skilled producer. From his experience up country, Carter knew that what the POWs badly needed was a different type of entertainment—one with characters and storylines. And they also needed to be excited by the “wow” factor that sets, costumes, makeup, props, and lights could provide.

Carter knew he could offer this type of entertainment and that his recent production of *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* at Aungganaung for Christmas would be just the ticket. With the cast and production staff of that pantomime now in Tamarkan, it would be easy to remount.

Approaching another producer, who could claim “squatters’ rights” on the camp theatre, about the possibility of sharing the venue, was, as Carter well knew, a tricky business (he had resented just such an intrusion in Bicycle Camp, Java, when the American POWs Hank Bretano and “Tex” McFarland had muscled in on his theatrical turf). Trying to find a way to broach the subject without raising anyone’s artistic hackles, Carter introduced himself to Jacobs after the next variety show and mentioned the success of his productions in Bicycle Camp and Aungganaung. But Jacobs knew he wasn’t a skilled producer and surprised Carter with his delight in finding a professional in the camp who could take over that role.

Ali Baba—Carter’s first show in Tamarkan—appeared on the lean-to stage at the end of February. Its production was not without complications: “Our comedian, Private Wally MacQueen [*sic*] of the 2/29th Battalion,” Jacobs recalled, “went down with an attack of malaria on the eve of the show, and the versatile Norman stepped in at the last moment and took the comedy part.” As at Aungganaung, Bob Clare and Ron Wells were a great success as the donkey.¹²

Once he saw Carter’s production, Jacobs realized he had a talented producer-director on his hands, one who could develop marvelous shows for the camp if given the opportunity and support. He volunteered to get permission from Colonel Ramsay to “pull this cowshed down and build a proper theatre” so Carter could produce revues and musicals for the troops. Carter suggested they should open the new theatre “with a real smasher . . . *The Wizard of Oz!*”¹³

“The Tamarkan Players”

Colonel Ramsay not only gave Jacobs permission to build a new theatre but nominated the members of a theatre committee to manage it: Jacobs would be officer in charge and general manager,

Norman Carter, producer; Lieutenant John M. Vance, secretary; and Padre Keith Mathieson of the H.M.A.S. *Perth* and Private Val Ballantyne, additional committee members.^{vi14} Ramsay also provided support for the concert party by giving them money from the camp fund so they could purchase needed materials.¹⁵ The new concert party was called “The Tamarkan Players.”¹⁶

With the array of talented actors, singers, and comedians available to him in Tamarkan—and with the support of the theatre committee and his team of designers and technicians—Carter set to work on a series of monthly spectacular and entertaining productions. In many ways, the story of entertainment in Tamarkan during 1944 is the story of Norman Carter and the extraordinary revues and musicals he produced. Besides his skills at directing actor-singers, Carter was also gifted at enlisting the artistic abilities and skills of designers and technicians to realize his production concepts.

Carter Sets the Standards

Arthur Shakes took responsibility for pulling down “the cowshed” and constructing the new theatre. Carter told him what was needed: “it must have a gabled roof, so that you can see the whole of the back wall, not just a fraction of it. It needs height, so that you can put up a grid from which to hang scenery, and it also needs depth and width, like an old-fashioned barn, some space off-stage for the actors to dress, and a pit for the orchestra.”¹⁷

Shakes was a little stunned by the size and complexity of the theatre Carter wanted built, but as a can-do person, he immediately organized one group of men to demolish the old theatre and another to go off and cut bamboo and atap to build the new one.¹⁸

Meanwhile, Carter worked out a rough script for his *Wizard of Oz* on an old typewriter left behind by Toosey’s troops. He then faced the question of who would play the crucial role of Dorothy. After being turned down by several prospects, he was advised to approach Ted Weller, whose beautiful high “silver tenor” voice “with a strong falsetto range” had been heard in the “cod-operas” at Aunganaung.¹⁹ But Weller was very reluctant to appear as a woman onstage (“What would my mates say?” “If he dressed up like a woman and sang like one, he’d never live it down.”²⁰). When Carter warned him that without his participation the show would have to be cancelled, Weller went to his commanding officer for advice and was told that “without his voice” the concert party could not produce the shows the men needed to rebuild their morale. Confronted with that argument, Weller reluctantly agreed.²¹

But being a female impersonator in a camp with thousands of men who were getting more rest and better food was not without its hazards, as we shall see.

The New Tamarkan Theatre

A week after Carter’s discussion with Shakes about the design of the new theatre, it was finished. It had been built opposite the men’s living quarters, facing the parade ground.

vi This original committee would eventually be supplemented by Private G. H. Trueman as stenographer, Lieutenant Arthur Shakes as stage manager, and scenic artists Spr. Frank Brydges and Private Robert Clare. Although not on the committee, Frank Purtell would be in charge of wardrobe, George Plunket, props, and Les Luff, hand props.

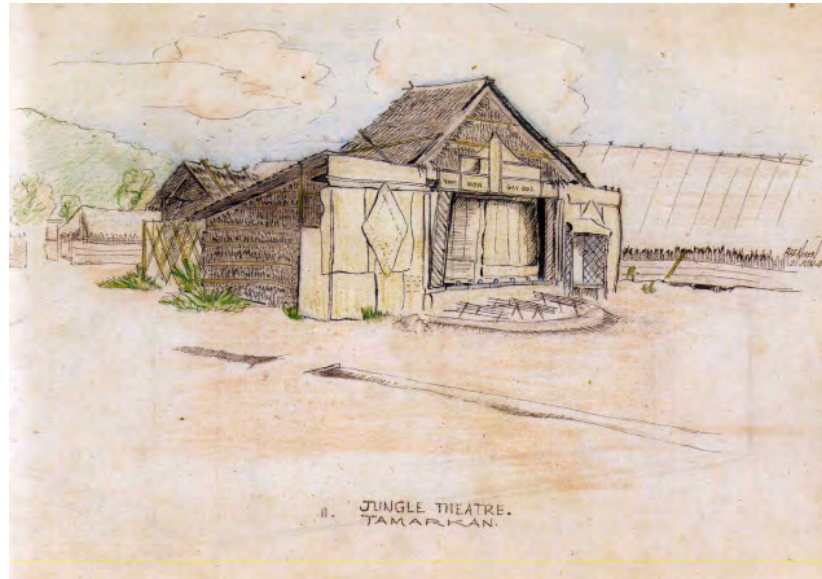


FIGURE 5.3. JUNGLE THEATRE, TAMARKAN.” RAE NIXON. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL. COURTESY OF MRS. RAE NIXON.

Rae Nixon’s sketch of the front of the new Tamarkan theatre shows the high gable-roofed proscenium theatre with wide lean-to extensions on either side of the stagehouse. Rice bags sewn together form the front draw curtains. A row of footlights saved from the previous theatre sits along the front edge of the stage. Over the proscenium opening is an oblong area that would be used as a marquee to announce the present or upcoming show. A shallow semicircular orchestra pit runs the full length of the stage. On the roof audience left is a large flap that could be propped up to allow sunlight to illuminate the upstage areas during matinee and early evening performances. A small gable-roofed shed used for various construction projects is visible behind the theatre.

Although there wasn’t height enough in the flies for the backdrops to be flown in and out from the grid over the stage, they could be rigged as rolled drops operated by pulleys from offstage.²² While variety and band shows would need only a single backdrop, Carter, with his revues and musicals, would take full advantage of these staging possibilities (further details concerning the Tamarkan theatre and its appointments are found in Chapter 12: “Jolly Good Show!”).

When Shakes gave him a tour of his new theatre, Carter found it even better than his beloved Bicycle Camp theatre back in Java: “Arthur pointed to the six stout bamboo poles overhead which formed the grid, showed me the wardrobe annexe on the O.P.^{vii} side and then led me down three steps at the back of the stage to the artists’ dressing room, with a table and three mirrors.”²³

^{vii} *Opposite Prompt, or stage right.*



FIGURE 5.4. BACKSTAGE IN TAMARKAN THEATRE. SKETCH.
FLIP RELF. COURTESY OF RHYLL RIVETT.

Dutch artist “Flip” Relf’s sketch of actors getting ready for a performance in the dressing room at the back of the Tamarkan theatre illustrates Carter’s description.²⁴ In the background are the steps leading from the dressing room directly to the stage.

Production Challenges

But producing quality theatre at Tamarkan would not be easy. Part of the difficulty was the fact that the Japanese administration would not allow rehearsals. This restriction was manageable if all that was produced were variety shows that only needed someone to devise the lineup on the playbill and a good compère to keep the show going. But for anyone trying to produce revues and musicals with scenes between characters, dances that needed choreography, and multiple set changes—all of which required careful rehearsal and coordination—it was an impossible situation. At first, Carter tried to operate within the rules. “Those involved in performance of the concerts,” Ted Weller recalled, “would learn their own lines without having a rehearsal. Carter was a strict disciplinarian and would give each performer his part and expect him to be ready for the performance on the night.”²⁵ But for a perfectionist like Carter, this restriction soon became intolerable.

Therefore, a “legitimate” version of “tossing the doctor”—the term used by the POWs for tricking a medical officer into believing you were so ill you couldn’t work—had to be developed to circumvent the restriction. It wasn’t only the actors and musicians who needed rehearsal time; it was also the design and technical staffs. “But with the co-operation of POW medical officers and administration staff,” Rae Nixon explained, “men who did the set construction, scene painting, music writing, costume making and rehearsing were officially classified ‘in hospital’ or in [camp] work parties.”²⁶ In this way, cast members and key production personnel were “kept hidden from work parties,” which allowed the concert party to

become “much larger and important for moral support which was obvious in the help and health of the men generally.”²⁷

But, as Tom Morris admitted, there were times when even this subterfuge didn’t work:

*And you couldn’t always protect those people, you know. If suddenly the Japs wanted a working party, everybody was pulled out on parade and the Korean orderlies [guards] just went around, and, you know, whooshed! And if you happened to be one of the concert party and you couldn’t pull a string, you just went off on a work party somewhere.*²⁸

In due time the “no rehearsal” policy eased a bit, and rehearsals were permitted—but only according to a very exact schedule.

Rehearsals were particularly awkward to manage as the Japanese stipulated that only one afternoon a week could be used for rehearsals. On that afternoon the order laid down was half an hour for dialogue, half an hour for singing, followed by the string orchestra, and finally the brass band. The order, and the time set for each section, was rigidly supervised by the Japanese. On no account were two sections allowed to rehearse at the same time. Why? No reason. Just Japanese orders.²⁹

Since this rehearsal schedule was also ludicrous, additional rehearsals continued by subterfuge. Major Jacobs’ comment, “My mornings were usually taken up with rehearsals for the weekly concert,” suggests that at some later point the Japanese administration at Tamarkan, as in other POW camps, may have finally been persuaded to allow proper rehearsals and other work on the shows to take place during the day, justified as “light duty” within the camp.³⁰

One rehearsal practice remained standard operating procedure at Tamarkan. If a burial party appeared on the horizon, the “[r]ehearsal would stop while the actors stood at attention until they had passed: the padre, followed by the camp trumpeter to blow the Last Post; the corpse wrapped in a threadbare blanket and carried on bamboo poles [stretcher] by two orderlies.” During their first weeks at Tamarkan, there could be four or five of these burials each morning.³¹ Such interruptions did not seem to impede Carter’s concentration and abilities to rehearse.

The Wizard of Oz

Carter’s production of *The Wizard of Oz* opened in mid-March. He had based it on the well-known Hollywood film and included all the songs from the movie. Given the poor quality of previous entertainments, Carter believed his performers might have a hard time generating an audience, but the success of *Ali Baba* and the appearance of a new theatre had created tremendous interest. Come the opening matinee performance, there was a full house and an air of excitement.³²

From the moment the curtains parted, the audience “roared their approval of everything and

everybody,” wrote Carter.³³ But if Carter was pleased, Major Jacobs was ecstatic:

In Teddy we had a female impersonator second to none. Bobby Clare as the Lion, Dick Moray as the Tin Man and Val Ballantyne in the role of the Straw Man gave splendid performances, but the real hit of the show was Lieut. Les Atyeo of Colac, who scored a personal triumph in a most delightful and whimsical interpretation of the Mayor of Munchkin.³⁴

According to Carter, the scenery painted by Frank Brydges and the costumes by Frank Purtell dazzled the audience and stole the show, “especially the Yellow Brick Road—a triumph of shaving-brush artistry—and Wally McQueen’s lovable lion. Those timorous roars, that frightful skin made out of old bags, that spouting mane of shredded rice-sacks! . . . [When] Judy and the Lion made their exit arm in arm with the Lion holding his tufted tail under one paw, it looked as though they’d never stop clapping,” wrote Carter. Everyone agreed that “‘*The Wizard of Oz*’ was wizard!”³⁵

After this initial success, persuading audiences to attend shows in Tamarkan was never a problem again. “Everybody who could walk turned up for our productions,” observed Kyle Thompson. “Even the Japanese came, and naturally, they occupied the choice front-row sitting area. There were no chairs, so everybody would sit on the ground during the performances. The Japanese seemed to thoroughly enjoy the shows, although most of them could understand little of the dialogue.”³⁶

Nixon thought it was very interesting that the Japanese who “attended the shows said nothing about the obvious preparations, [and] enjoyed themselves.”³⁷ In his mind, it was impossible for them not to recognize that rehearsals had taken place for such elaborate and complex productions. But their silence gave consent. In their own paradoxical logic, the Japanese allowed the preparations to take place while denying they had given permission for them.

The “Rimboe Club” Arrives

In early April, a new contingent of N.E.I. POWs arrived in Tamarkan from Kanburi hospital camp a few miles down the road. In this group was a Dutch/Indonesian cabaret troupe, known as the “Rimboe Club,” who had performed in Regue/100 Kilo, Burma, and more recently in Kanburi. Led by the Dutch adjutant van Dorst, it contained several comedians, singers, and musical groups. In contrast to a like situation at Chungkai that turned into a full-blown contretemps when a Dutch/Indonesian troupe sought permission to perform, the newcomers at Tamarkan were invited to present their shows under the Tamarkan Players banner. The soldier who had danced the Hawaiian hula as “Miss Waikiki” in Regue would become famous in Tamarkan as “Sambal Sue”—a nickname given “her” by the Australians and Americans after the spicy-hot Indonesian finger food available in the camp.

Also in the group was J. G. Julsing, who kept a list of the dates and titles of all the theatrical and musical productions he saw as a POW. This important document gives us a more thorough understanding of the range of entertainment produced by the Tamarkan Players than is available in either Jacobs’ or Carter’s accounts.

Julsing’s list makes clear that besides Norman Carter, at least four different organizations were producing shows in Tamarkan: there were Skilton and Bullock’s variety shows, Norman Whittaker’s brass band concerts, Tony Gerrish’s dance band shows, and the van Dorst cabaret troupe—all performing what

renderings in color in apposition to the death and burial records in black and white. While in Tamarkan, he kept his sketchbook hidden under blankets or on his body concealed in his clothing.⁴⁵

But Nixon did more than draw designs for costumes in his sketchbook. He also added invaluable information about how the materials for them could be provided from borrowed clothing or scrounged or purchased items. And, in addition, he drew thumbnail sketches of some of the settings as context for the individual characters in his costume plots. With this information, we are able to reconstruct in some detail several of Carter's productions at Tamarkan, which allows us to appreciate not only Nixon's enormous talent but the ingenuity of the wardrobe staff and the set design and technical staffs as well (all of which is more fully examined in Chapter 12: "Jolly Good Show!").

This was not the only sketchbook of costume renderings Nixon produced for Norman Carter and other Tamarkan producers. Others were raffled off to fund further costuming operations and were quickly snapped up as treasured souvenirs by those who recognized Nixon's brilliance.⁴⁶ But Nixon did not offer to raffle off the sketchbook cited here. It was much too precious a document of the men's amazing theatrical accomplishments. This sketchbook is now preserved in the archives of the Australian War Memorial. The fate of the other sketchbooks is unknown.

When Knights Were Bold

Norman Carter's production for April was the musical comedy *When Knights Were Bold*. Having performed in a production of this popular West End musical in England, Carter wrote the whole script from memory.⁴⁷ Nixon jotted down a summary of the plotline in his sketchbook: "The story of a modern knight who falls asleep & finds himself living 4 centuries ago. Everything is of the century but Guy—he is still modern. His servants & friends are the same people he knows in his modern world. Confusing."⁴⁸

Except for Lieutenant Atyeo, who played the knight, Sir Guy de Vere, everyone in the cast played two roles: one in the present and a contrary one in the past. For example, Ted Weller played the worldly Lady Rowena in the present, a nun in the past; Private Wells was the Hon. Charles Widdicombe in the first present, Fathead the Fool in the past; and Major Jacobs, as Sir Brian Ballymore, became a nasty chain mail—clothed knight in the second act. All Jacobs could remember about this show was being "knocked down by Les Atyeo (Sir Guy de Vere) who planted his foot on my chest and shouted 'Victory.'"

Norman seemed to take a delight in giving me parts in which I suffered some indignity. It was all in good fun of course, and I enjoyed the situations immensely. The troops enjoyed them still more, they thought it was great fun to see an officer getting the worst of it.⁴⁹

Under Carter's direction, Jacobs, one of the older POW entertainers, came into his own as a performer in Tamarkan. Carter praised him as "a top-line character actor."⁵⁰

With *Knights*, Carter continued to fulfill his pledge to make his shows visually exciting—challenging his scenic, props, and costume staffs to be inventive in solving his design and technical requests. Under Navy Lieutenant George Plunket's guidance, the props crew constructed a suit of medieval armor for one character and a helmet for another out of tin, while Frank Purtell and his wardrobe staff built ladies' gowns and men's tuxedos for the contemporary scene and chain mail, a nun's habit, a monk's hooded robe, and a motley outfit with bells attached for the flashback medieval scene.⁵¹ With the help of "Flip" Relf, Frank

Brydges painted wonderful scenery on grass sleeping mats.⁵² The show was so popular it was repeated later that week.⁵³

Jack Turner, the Australian female impersonator, wrote glowingly of Carter's Tamarkan productions: "they would have been well received in any Tivoli Theatre in Australia."⁵⁴ Curiously enough, Turner himself was not involved in any of them: "I took no part in these shows as I had a good rest," he wrote.^{viii55}

Other Entertainment

Between *When Knights Were Bold* and Carter's next show, Julsing lists three entertainment offerings by other groups at Tamarkan with titles such as *Zer Gud! (Very Good)* and *Rivier Hesnet (The River Hesnet)*. He doesn't identify who produced these shows; one or more of them must have been by N.E.I. performers, but because he used the Dutch term *cabaret* to refer to what, in English, would be called a "variety show," we are at some loss to assign what show to what group. No information has been found on these shows, although it is likely there is more about them in Dutch archives.

We do know about a turn in one of the "cabarets," though, because it became very popular with audiences at Tamarkan. This was the singing group "Arry's 'Appy Amps." Jack Turner wrote a paragraph about this remarkable ensemble in his report of his POW experience:

Men were still having their legs amputated through tropical ulcers and the cheerful way men with one leg hopping around on bamboo made crutches was good to see. One concert night 12 men with only one leg sang songs as 'Waltzing Matilda,' 'Home Sweet Home' and 'Roll Out The Barrel.'"⁵⁶

We will hear more about "Arry's 'Appy Amps" later on.

Japan Parties

For months, rumors had circulated in the camp about POWs being sent to Japan. In April those rumors became a reality when fit men were selected, or volunteered, for a series of overseas drafts that would continue into June. Many of the prisoners were tired of living in a boring POW camp in Thailand. They thought conditions might be better in Japan. Two of these men were Jack Turner and his song parody writer mate, Frank Huston. Another was Brigadier General Varley, only in his case he was ordered to leave Tamarkan and join the other senior British and Australian officers who had been removed from Changi to Formosa in 1942. On his departure, Lieutenant-Colonel Anderson took over command at Tamarkan.

The Japan Party drafts were sent by rail to Saigon, French Indochina, for transport to Japan. But they were delayed from sailing because American aircraft and submarines were raiding the Japanese shipping lanes. During their wait, Turner came out of retirement to perform once again.^{ix}

^{viii} Although Carter never mentions Captain Bronte Edwards of the 2/3rd Machine Gun Battalion in his memoir, Jack Turner claims Carter received able assistance from Edwards with his shows at Tamarkan (Turner, IWM, 27).

^{ix} After a three-month interval, they were sent to Singapore but would not embark until September—on the ill-fated *Rakuyo Maru*, which was attacked by an American submarine en route and sank. Brigadier General Varley was among those who did not survive.⁵⁷ Jack Turner did, and after days adrift was rescued by an American submarine and returned to Australia.

Camp Update: “Better Termed a Rest Camp”

At the beginning of May, Major Jacobs took stock: “From the time of our arrival at Tamarkan [in January] the health of the men began to improve. For the first three months the sick from the jungle camps were dying at the rate of ten to fifteen each week. By May 1944 most of the men not in hospital were fairly fit, while the majority of the hospital patients were out of danger.”⁵⁸ Arthur Bancroft agreed: “Life here was far from boring and an occasional concert made conditions almost ideal. It would have been better termed a rest camp.”⁵⁹ Better food, medicine, light duty, sports—and a constant supply of quality entertainment—had played major roles in the transformation.

Pinocchio

Pinocchio was Norman Carter’s musical production for May. It was based on the Disney movie, but this time Carter wrote the script in rhymed couplets, like a pantomime.⁶⁰ As had become standard practice with Norman Carter productions, there had to be the “wow” factor of new and exciting costumes, sets, and staging to please his audiences. And his staging requests always seemed to have some challenging problems for his designers and technicians to solve. Two of the problems in *Pinocchio* were (1) how to make the puppet of Pinocchio, and then (2) how to effect the transformation from the puppet to the live actor (the ingenious way in which these problems were solved is detailed in Chapter 12: “Jolly Good Show!”).⁶¹

Besides Wally McQueen as Pinocchio, the cast also included “Busty” Badger as Stomboli, the wicked circus proprietor, and Major Jacobs as Honest John Foulfellow. This time the actor who “stole the show,” in Jacobs’ estimation, was “an American sergeant, Ed Worthington from Texas . . . with his droll interpretation of Jimmy Cricket.”⁶² Sergeant Worthington was a member of the 131st Field Artillery captured on Java. Back at Choan School POW camp on Java, he had delighted his fellow prisoners by playing an End Man^x in a minstrel show.⁶³

Like its predecessors, *Pinocchio* “went over with a bang,” exclaimed a very pleased Norman Carter. “All mens were whistling ‘Hey diddle de dee, an actor’s life for me!’ for weeks after.”⁶⁴

“Home for Christmas”

In early June, the POWs at Tamarkan heard about the D-Day invasion at Normandy from their secret radio. Carter wrote, “Life at Tamarkan . . . was pleasant and the dickie bird was singing so sweetly that everyone was betting on being home for Christmas.”⁶⁵

Jack Turner heard the exciting news while in Saigon awaiting transport to Japan. He was told this information secretly so it could be shared with the other POWs during one of his performances. The problem of how to spread the news without arousing the suspicions of the Japanese was solved by Turner’s mate Frank Huston, who revised his earlier parody of the traditional army barracks song “Eleven More Months and Ten More Days” with topical references, Australian slang, and phrasing that only the POWs would understand. Its new title—“Home for Christmas”—would be enough to alert the POW audience to listen up.

We joined the blinkin’ Army, they told us we’d have fun,

^x Minstrel shows had four comics called End Men who sat in pairs on either side of the stage making comments on the other performers in asides to the audience and launching into their own farcical routines.

*They sent us to Malaya and now look what they've done.
We've been like this for over two years, but now it won't be long,
And so all you no-hoppers pay attention to my song.*

*There's men who came from Java, some men from Singapore,
Some Navy and some Air Force, in fact there's men galore.
And Nippon here has told us men go home when railway's made
But now the writings on the wall, we know their hopes will fade.*

*The rumours fly like cockie's chaff, each day a change of views
The Russians must be quite worn out, to keep up with the news.
We'd like to get the dinkum oil, we'd like to know its right,
Now that England's jumped down off the fence, she'll soon clean up this
fight.*

Chorus.

*We'll be home in time for Xmas, so the boys around us say,
So pack up all your troubles 'cos we're leaving any day.⁶⁶*

The song is filled with allusions and coded words. Some allusions, like “writings on the wall,” and “the Russians must be quite worn out” (Russia hoped that a second front would be opened by the Allies to relieve their siege by the German Army), and England having “jumped down off the fence” (reference to the long-awaited invasion of Europe) would be understood by all the POWs no matter what their nationality. But some of the slang would need further translation for any non-Australians in their midst: “Cockie’s chaff” is Australian farmer slang for “a farmer’s teasing banter,” and “dinkum oil” for “the truth.”⁶⁷ These phrases must have totally baffled the Japanese censor.

Memories of the Gay 90s

The middle of June saw Carter’s next show, *Memories of the Gay 90s*, an original revue inspired by the old-time British music hall. For Carter, one of the great values of this theatrical form was its audience participation. Therefore, in writing the script he included many well-known music hall songs so the audiences could join in on the choruses.

This time, in order to fulfill his audiences’ expectations of elaborate sets and costumes, Carter pushed his design staff and technical crews to the limits of their abilities and resources. Without recourse to libraries or archives to research visual sources, the show’s designers had to recall what Victorian and Edwardian clothing, architecture, and other artifacts looked like. (How the designers and technicians met these design, construction, and staging challenges is detailed in Chapter 12: “Jolly Good Show!”.) In

addition, Norman Whittaker and his band would have to remember, score, and rehearse all the music for the show.

With an international cast of twenty-nine actors playing forty-one characters, two scenic artists, one costume designer, twenty-one technical, wardrobe, and running crew members, and twenty-three musicians in Norman Whittaker's band, Norman Carter's *Memories of the Gay 90s* was an enormous undertaking. He seemed to be producing the show for London's West End or Sydney's Tivoli Theatre, not a dusty godforsaken POW camp in Thailand.

A Closer Look

Nixon's detailed notes and thumbnail sketches allow us to examine this extraordinary POW production in more detail. Since it was an original Norman Carter script, we get an opportunity to see his genius as a writer-producer-director. The show is brilliantly imagined in terms of its overall production concept and theatricality. Carter's choice of characters and scenic locations would evoke many memories and associations in his British and Australian audiences. The synopsis that follows reveals Carter's great fondness for, the older theatrical form that placed such an emphasis on "star turns" and audience participation.

The plot is constructed on the typical revue pattern of following a few central characters on a trip abroad, thus permitting a series of interesting scenic locations and chance encounters. An intriguing twist on this pattern is the framing device Carter created for the main action. In this case, the reminiscences of an old music hall couple (Grandpa and Grandma Dan Leno) celebrating their golden anniversary and music hall careers become a series of vignettes in which their memories come to life.⁶⁸ Dan Leno was one of the stars of the British music hall (Carter himself took the role of Grandma Leno). In order to include the renowned music hall and variety artiste Lily Langtry in his show, he arbitrarily made her Dan Leno's wife.

The show is filled with music. In the absence of widely available souvenir programs, a compère standing at stage left introduces the various music hall performers as they appear and prompts the audience to participate when appropriate.

Synopsis. *Memories* opened with a prologue in which Grandpa and Grandma Leno were introduced to the audience and then retired to their "latticed summer house" in front of the proscenium wall at audience right (the traditional location of the "Chairman" in the old music hall), where they remain for the rest of the show, recalling memories of their happy life together.

What followed were nine "memory" scenes beginning with the Old Bull and Bush Music Hall (Scene 1), where Dan Leno first sees Lily Langtry singing "The Old Bush & Bush" and "Lily of Lagoon." (Lily was played, of course, by Ted Weller.) They meet and fall in love, but Lily insists that Dan ask her mother for her hand in marriage. This action leads directly into the "Parlour Scene" (Scene 2). When Dan arrives, Mrs. Lantry recalls her own aborted marriage by singing the lament, "There Was I Waiting at the Church." After Dan's offer of marriage is accepted, they all leave for the seaside resort at Margate for the start of Dan and Lily's honeymoon.

While the setting was being changed, the music hall star Albert Chevalier enters downstage *in one* (Scene 3) dressed as a cockney costermonger in a traditional mother-of-pearl button outfit and sings, "Knocked 'Em in the Old Kent Road." (*In one* is the theatrical term for performing in what was known as the "first slot"—in this case, in front of the backdrop used in the "Old Bull and Bush Music Hall" scene.)

The "Margate Beach Scene" (Scene 4) is filled with local color: a bathing box proprietor, a boatman who rents wherries, and a rock candy sweet seller. While Lily is changing into her bathing costume, Dan

appears in his striped bathing suit singing “Song of the Sea.” When Lily appears, she is accosted by four apparent “Mashers,” who make eyes at her. But they turn out to be a friendly strolling barbershop quartet who serenade her with a medley of songs, including “Beside the Seaside,” “Sweet Adeline,” and “Fall In and Follow Me.”



FIGURE 5.6. COSTUME RENDERING FOR “THE MASHERS.” RAE NIXON. COURTESY OF ROBIN KALHORN.

Following this serenade, Lily and Dan go down to the beach to bathe, and there Lily has an accident—a crab bites her toe.

After the “Margate Beach Scene,” Dan and Lily sail for Paris. With the quick lowering of a rolled backdrop and the appearance of tab curtains, the setting transforms to a Paris cabaret (Scene 5), where cancan girls dance to Offenbach’s rowdy music from *Orpheus in the Underworld*.

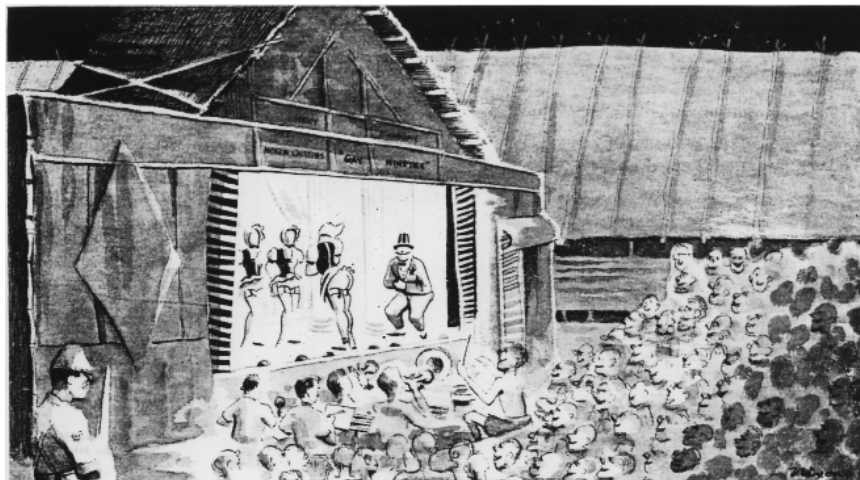


FIGURE 5.7. CANCAN SCENE FROM *MEMORIES OF THE GAY 90S*, RAE NIXON. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL. COURTESY OF MRS. RAE NIXON.

With their honeymoon over, Grandpa and Grandma reminisce about two of their favorite stage moments. Grandma's is the melodrama "Lights of London", the longest scene in the show. It had a large cast, including a Coffee Stall Keeper, a Pedestrian, the Toff, and a number of other typical London street characters. Ted Weller (in a change of costume and makeup) appeared as "Sally Turin, the Heroine of the Embankment" in this melodrama-within-a-revue. Carter's use of the traditional "Coffee Stall Sketch" allowed each character to have his or her own turn in the spotlight. For instance, the Toff sings "Fill 'Em Up," and the Pedestrian (played by the dance band leader Tony Gerrish) sings "Won't They Buy My Pretty Flowers" in a duet with Sally.

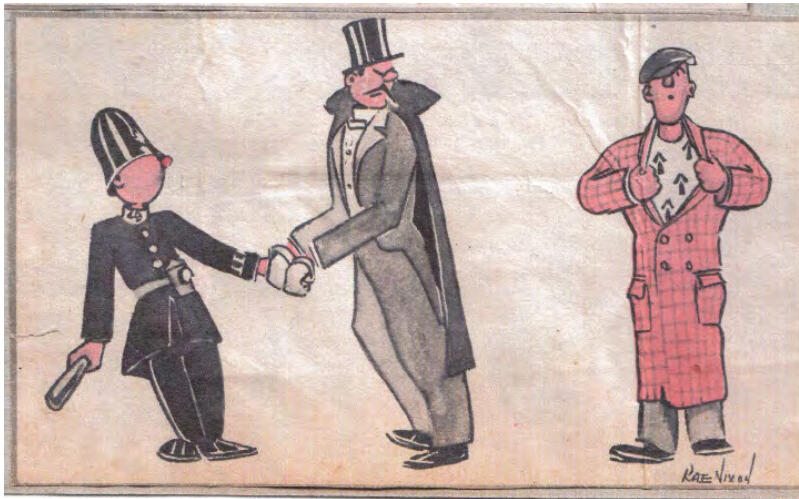


FIGURE 5.8. COSTUME RENDERINGS FOR CHARACTERS IN "LIGHTS OF LONDON" MELODRAMA IN *MEMORIES OF THE GAY 90S*. RAE NIXON. COURTESY OF ROBIN KALHORN.

The plot of the melodrama has Sally threatened by the villain, Sir Murgatroyd Winterbottom, played by Jacobs. "And I was duly hissed every time I appeared on stage," he recalled. Sally is rescued from Winterbottom's clutches by Frank Fearless and turned over to the Bobbie. "Of course in the end I was 'foiled again,'" Jacobs continued, "and taken off to the lockup by the comic policeman."⁶⁹ With prompts from the compère to hiss the villain and cheer the hero, the old-fashioned melodrama was the hit of the show.

It must have been during dress rehearsals that the stage manager discovered that the major changeover from "The Lights of London" to the final scene in the orchard was going to take much longer than planned. So a third scene was added to lengthen the time beyond the two already scheduled to be played in one for the changeover. The first of these (Scene 7) featured the magician Maskelene and his assistant performing sleight-of-hand tricks.^{xi} It was followed (Scene 8) with a "star turn" by the great music hall comedian George Formby Sr., singing "Tickle Me Timothy."

The bit added at the last minute (Scene 8-A) was "Molasses and Capt'n January," incorporating nineteenth-century characters from the popular 1930s American radio show *Captain Henry's Maxwell House Show Boat*. Molasses was played in blackface by American Ed Worthington. Given the American reference, it's likely Worthington was the one who suggested this routine.⁷⁰

^{xi} John Nevil Maskelyne had been a famous London magician during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The final scene—the “Orchard Scene” (Scene 9)—with its magnificent flowering apple tree was Grandpa Leno’s favorite memory of a past theatrical moment. From one sturdy branch hung a swing holding Dolly Gray, who is being wooed by Lobster, a young soldier who “asks Dolly to marry him one last time before sailing to the Boer War.” (This scene could have brought the show very close to home for many audience members who may have made the same request as Lobster before sailing away to the Far East.) Two of Dolly’s other admirers hover in the background; one on a bicycle, played by Dan Leno, sings “Honeysuckle & the Bee.”⁷¹ With the singing of “Soldiers of the Queen” and “Goodbye Dolly,” the revue was brought to a rousing conclusion.⁷²

Reviews. “After all these preparations, plus hours of rehearsal,” Carter proudly proclaimed, “it was no wonder that *The Gay Nineties* was voted ‘the best yet.’”⁷³ And lest we think his opinion of his own show inflated, at least one member of his audience offered confirmation: Rohan Rivett thought it Carter’s finest production. The POWs whistled the tunes for months—which was, of course, exactly what Carter hoped for.⁷⁴ *Memories of the Gay 90s* was one of the most astonishing shows ever produced by POWs on the Thailand-Burma railway.

Two Theatrical Casualties

Many POWs had feared their months-long starvation diet during the construction of the railway would cause permanent impotence, but with better food, extended rest, and lighter duty in Tamarkan, they were surprised to discover their sexual urges had returned. Yet the only projections for their sexual fantasies were the female impersonators. Because of rude remarks made by Rivett after *Memories of the Gay 90s*, Teddy Weller told Carter it would be his last show. Carter was unable to persuade him otherwise.

Weller wasn’t the only female impersonator who came in for salacious comments while onstage or in the camp. The impersonator most affected by jibes and innuendoes about his sexuality was the hula dancer “Sambal Sue.” After one particularly “sexy” performance, he announced “he could not continue being confined in close quarters with thousands of POWs who had not been in the company of actual females for nearly three years.”⁷⁵ Tamarkan had now lost its two best female impersonators. (For an in-depth examination of these incidents and issues surrounding the subject of female impersonators in the POW shows, see Chapter 14: “Somebody Had to Put a Skirt On.”)

“At the End of the Day”

With *Memories*, Carter pushed the limits of what the Tamarkan Players could produce, and Major Jacobs decided to add new positions to the theatre committee’s permanent membership to contain the ever-increasing size and scope of Carter’s ambitions. Other Tamarkan producers needed the designers’ and technicians’ attention for their shows as well. The new committee members were bandmaster Norman Whittaker as music director, Rae Nixon as costume designer, and Frank Purtell as costumer. Several new positions and personnel were also added to the production staff, including a head of properties and a master wigmaker, N.E.I. POW Jan Jansen.

On 26 June there was a dance band show entitled *Zieken rapp* (*Sick List*), in which an original song, “At the End of the Day,” was introduced by Pat Fox. It “turned into an instant hit—a melody filled with memories, one that worked its way hauntingly into the minds of so many of us,” admitted Kyle Thompson. In fact, it so haunted Thompson that he included the lyrics and score in his memoir.

*At the end of the day,
Some soft music I play
And I let my heart go free.
For the day had been hard and long,
Only with song could I bring you to me.*

*In the evening at last
As the hours passed,
The jungle lay quite still.
I sing to my love as the moon up above
Goes slowly over the hill.*

*A faint touch of breeze
That just rustles the trees
As it swept and swayed the air,
And I think of our loved ones fair,
So very dear to everyone there.*

*In the twilight I live anew
The things we used to do.
One day we'll be free,
Oh what heaven for you and me!⁷⁶*

Dingbats Abroad

A cabaret on 3 July was followed two weeks later by Carter's production for July, *Dingbats Abroad*. The show, scheduled to open a week earlier, had been postponed, and in the end had only a one-week instead of the usual two-week run. Given the time of year, it might have been delayed by rain. All the Carter regulars were in the cast—except, of course, Ted Weller. The leading female role was taken by Jack Farmer, who had appeared as “Dolly” in *Memories of the Gay 90s*.

With *Dingbats*, the strain of constantly being in production mode writing and directing the next “best-yet” production was beginning to show. Unable to imagine a different storyline for his new revue, Carter adhered to the same format as *Memories of the Gay 90s*, only this time it was the “story of Dave (a country boy) who marries a sophisticated girl (‘Magenta’) and goes abroad.”⁷⁷ Dave’s valet, Egbert, accompanies them on their honeymoon. According to Nixon’s notes, Carter did, at least, give the plot some complications: “Dave has a little bother with Magenta, who flies to the Captain (Jacobs) & later a French Officer (Rohan Rivett).” It is Egbert, of course, “who always did the right thing at the right time,” who

Crises

When flooding from late monsoon rains inundated the hospital camp at Chungkai, Lieutenant-Colonel Yanagida moved his Group II headquarters across the river to Tamarkan on 2 August.⁸¹ Tamarkan, situated on a high bank above the river, had not been affected by the flooding.

Come August, the Tamarkan Players found themselves struggling to put on another musical theatre production. “Every show had to be scripted, either from memory or imagination,” Carter explained, “and by August the ideas department had run dry. Jakes [Jacobs] called a conference on stage, and it was unanimously agreed that, of all the shows we had done, musicals were by far the most popular and that we should do another.”⁸² The string of Norman Carter’s successes had set high audience expectations, and the concert party was determined to continue fulfilling them. But relieving Carter from this creative burden meant that other potential producers would have to ransack their individual and collective memories for any image, story, or song from a movie or radio show that could possibly be turned into a musical.

In the weeks that followed, the Tamarkan Players found they were able to keep that hope alive. A musical called *Broadway* was produced on 7 August, followed a week later by another called *Hillbillies*. But the concert that took place on 15 August was unusual: a show Julsing listed as a *Japanese Cabaret* (unfortunately, we have no POW account of this unique show). On 21 August the musical *Wedding of the Painted Doll*, based on the popular song staged in the Hollywood film *Broadway Melody*, debuted, and three days later came a different type of musical event—a concert of light classical music.⁸³

Cinderella

It was really Carter himself who was at a loss in the “ideas department.” With his production slot for August coming up, Carter, in desperation, finally decided to produce *Cinderella*, the pantomime he had in final rehearsals back at Bicycle Camp on Java in 1942, which had to be aborted when the prisoners were ordered to Burma. He had avoided previous consideration of this panto, perhaps, because working on it would be too painful a reminder of friends and performers who had died so horribly on the railway in Burma.

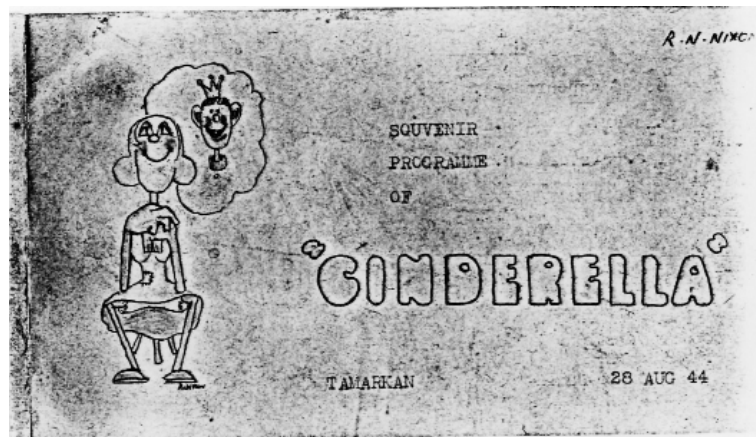


FIGURE 5.10. SOUVENIR PROGRAM FOR NORMAN CARTER’S *CINDERELLA*. RAE NIXON, AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL. COURTESY OF MRS. RAE NIXON.

Cinderella opened on 28 August. Carter did not attempt to revive his earlier production. For that

one he had cast the “gorgeous” Dutch female impersonator Vilhelm Vanderdeken as Cinderella.⁸⁴ This time, casting against type for added comic effect, he chose the tall and gangly Pat Fox as Cinderella to play opposite the short and stubby Wally McQueen as Prince Charming. Jim Anderson, usually the male lead, played the Fairy Godmother. The two stepsisters—the pantomime dame roles—were played by Doug Colman and Les Atyeo. To get a rise out of his Dutch/Indonesian audience, Carter cast the popular Dutch comedian van Dorst in a female role as Fatima Shortshanks. And Sid “Happy” Marshall also made his Thailand debut as a female impersonator in this production as Gretchen Tossle.⁸⁵

Carter does not mention this production in his memoir, and there are no extant costume renderings by Nixon, so we know little about its contents. One story comes from Jacobs: “I suffered further indignities in Cinderella, in which as the Demon King, I was dragged on to the stage by my horned tail, Bobby Clare, as the dog Pluto, doing the dragging.”⁸⁶

A Burnout Case

After seven months of constant pressure to write and produce a series of large and complex musicals—always trying to top previous productions—Carter was burnt out. *Cinderella* would be his last production in Tamarkan. Though the Tamarkan Players would go on producing entertainment, none of their shows would equal the elaborate production values, professional polish, and sheer pleasure of those developed by Norman Carter.

The unenviable task of deciding what kind of show could follow such a wonderfully wacky pantomime as *Cinderella* was brilliantly answered by staging a satirical cabaret version of it on 18 September. Ten days later was the N.E.I. show *Klein Cabaret (Little Cabaret)*, and the first week of October saw a production of *Indian Love Call*, a musical based on Friml, Hammerstein, and Harbach’s musical *Rose-Marie*.⁸⁷ Nixon’s American Indian costumes designed for *Dingbats* were no doubt pulled from stock and reused for this production.

A New Entertainment Challenge

With the start of October, something completely different was about to happen in the entertainment world at Tamarkan. As general manager of the Tamarkan Players, Major Jacobs was ordered by Colonel Yanagida’s office to produce a series of musical and theatrical shows for a three-day festival celebrating the formation of I. J. A. Group II in 1942.⁸⁸ Knowing the Tamarkan Players could not satisfy these demands by themselves, Jacobs received permission to cross over to Chungkai “so that [he] could consult the concert party committee . . . on the matter of exchanging ideas for programmes.” There he met with Bill Pycok, chair of the Chungkai theatre committee, and arranged for Norman Smith’s orchestra and “The Swingtette” musical ensemble to give performances at Tamarkan during the upcoming festival.⁸⁹

On 14 October, the POW administrative headquarters at Chungkai was ordered transferred to Tamarkan so that the lines of communication between it and Yanagida’s headquarters would be immediate and direct.

The festival at Tamarkan took place on 15, 16, and 17 October. In honor of the occasion, a new theatre was built in the Japanese compound. Back in Chungkai, John Sharp heard about the event and noted it in his diary: “our Chungkai orchestra performing in the intervals—lasted 5 hours, with much enthusiasm and many encores—inaugurating new theatre.”⁹⁰ Later, a performance of two Japanese

“evening” plays took place.^{xiii91}

The next night a revival of Norman Carter’s *Pinocchio* was preceded by a short concert by “The Swingtette.”⁹² Jacobs was particularly enthusiastic about this group, especially the accordionist, Han Samethini:

This swing band was a very clever combination of drums, slap bass, trumpet and piano accordion. The accordionist was a Dutch Eurasian named Samathini [*sic*], and was far and away the best performer on the instrument I have ever heard. A sound musician and a showman to his fingertips, Samathini made a tremendous hit with the Tamarkanites.⁹³

The revival of *Pinocchio* ran for two nights, 16–17 October. It was performed not in the new theatre but in the POW theatre where it had originally been staged. Captain C. D. L. Aylwin, part of the POW administrative staff newly arrived from Chungkai, compared the production with those he had witnessed in his former camp:

The work put in to the production scenery and dresses of “Pinocchio” must have been tremendous. But the show lacked good acting and fire. Perhaps after Chungkai, I expected too much and Tamakhan [*sic*] suffers from the disadvantage of a small stage. But Tamakhan boasts an Australian Brass Band which played well if a little too sedately, throughout.⁹⁴

Given Aylwin’s reactions to the performance, it’s hard to believe that Carter had a hand in this remount. But if he did, Aylwin’s observations that “the show lacked good acting and fire” and that Whittaker’s brass band had played “sedately, throughout” may be a clue to what was really going on. Having been forced to perform for the emperor’s birthday celebration at Thanbyuzayat, Burma, back in 1943, the Tamarkan POWs decided to perform now as they had then—poorly—as an act of resistance. In this way they couldn’t be accused by their mates of having gone ‘Jap-happy.’

After the festival was over, the determined entertainers at Tamarkan continued to produce weekly shows through the rest of October and into late November, one of which—*Thanks for Everything, Harry Rosendaal!*—Nixon claimed was one of their best.⁹⁵ The production standards Carter had set were still being maintained.

Camp Update: Allied Bombing Attacks

There is a gap in the entertainment record at Tamarkan between 27 November and 25 December that coincides with a series of Allied bombing raids. The first, on 29 November, attacked the anti-aircraft battery protecting the two bridges just outside the camp. As Jacobs remembered the incident, the raid took place just as the POWs were lined up for their evening *tenko* (roll call).

^{xiii} Julsing’s intriguing citation cries out for further explanation, but none has been found. Could these have been traditional *noh* plays?

We were waiting for the Japs to come and count us, when we heard the sound of planes.

All heads turned towards the west, from whence the whirr of engines could be plainly heard. Headed in our direction, and coming out of the setting sun, we counted twenty-one large bombers flying at about five thousand feet.

Somebody said, "Its alright, they're Nips."

"Like hell they are," cried another, "the Nips haven't any four-engine bombers."⁹⁶

The attack was devastating. Seventeen POWs were killed, including some who had recently transferred to Tamarkan from Chungkai.⁹⁷ Jacobs was part of the team recovering the bodies. The stage was used as a temporary morgue.⁹⁸

Christmas Preparations

Despite the continued threat of Allied bombing raids—or, perhaps, in defiance of them—plans were made for another pantomime for the men's third Christmas in captivity. And there was fond hope that Carter would come out of retirement to produce it. Rae Nixon and a friend presented Carter with a script they had written for a production of *Aladdin*. On reading it, Carter realized he would be in serious trouble with Colonel Ramsay as he had been earlier in Meiloe, Burma, if he produced it:

It was undeniably one of the funniest pantomime scripts I'd ever read, but it was hotter than mid-summer in Marble Bar! The traditional Laundry Scene, with the Widow Twankey washing a lady customer's undies and her remarks upon the chastity of the wearer, positively sizzled. Compared with this scorcher, *Radiosities* was an iceberg.⁹⁹

Carter refused to produce the panto and warned the authors against pursuing it because of its salacious humor. But Nixon and his mate were not persuaded by Carter's argument and decided to produce it themselves.¹⁰⁰ With the mixture of anxiety and fear caused by the recent bombing, it was more important than ever to have some sort of entertainment to restore the POWs' flagging spirits. Gathering together the Tamarkan Players' singers, actors, musicians, and tech crew, Nixon began rehearsals for *Aladdin and His Wonderful Lamp*.

Camp Update: Change of Command

On 1 December, Lieutenant-Colonel Yanagida was transferred from Tamarkan to Nakhon Pathom to take charge of the major hospital camp there, and Lieutenant-Colonel Ishii, who had been in charge at Nakhon Pathom, was moved to Tamarkan to assume Yanagida's former duties as Group II Commandant.

Further Bombing Raids

Before *Aladdin* could be presented, two additional Allied bombing raids on 8 and 13 December

attempted to knock out the bridges. The second, a low-level run, was more destructive. Incendiary bullets set fire to many of the camp structures. Remarkably, the theatre was not one of them. The following day, Colonel Ishii ordered the entire camp evacuated across the river to Chungkai. Jacobs, along with Colonel Ramsay and his headquarters staff, was in the first party to leave; Norman Carter in the party that followed a few days later. “As we marched across the parade ground,” Carter wrote, “I turned for a final look at the theatre which had given so much pleasure to so many. Across its proscenium was written, ‘Coming soon: Aladdin and his Wonderful Lamp.’ Actors are optimists.”¹⁰¹

Crossing the concrete and steel bridge over the Mae Khlong, the men were able to assess the bombing’s effects. The steel bridge had received only slight damage; the wooden bridge had several spans knocked out.¹⁰² Both were quickly repaired using POW labor.

Aladdin and His Wonderful Lamp

Aladdin opened on Christmas Day 1944 with two performances: one in the late morning, the other in the late afternoon. Because Colonel Ramsay and his staff had been among the first evacuees from the camp to Chungkai, its saucy humor brought no objections, only laughter. George Wiseman noted that the show included a Father Christmas and that “crackers, cigars, etc. [had been] chucked to audience” during the show—all pantomime traditions.¹⁰³ *Aladdin* proved to be an enormous success. Norman Carter had been a good teacher.

Just prior to its opening, members of several maintenance parties from work camps up the railway line had arrived in Tamarkan, where they were retained for the Christmas holidays before returning to their base camps. On their way back to Chungkai were John Sharp, variety show producer Eddie Edwins, cowboy singer Larry Croisette, accordionist Fred Coles, and theatre poster/scenic artist Geoffrey Gee.

Sharp wrote a brief review of *Aladdin* in his diary, also commenting on the other events for Christmas Day: “Performances of Aladdin given in the morning and afternoon—bright dialogue and good effects; also band concerts, a football match (British beat Dutch 3–1), boxing display, etc. Informal concerts in the evening, and lights out at 11.”¹⁰⁴

Gee, who attended the morning performance, provided more details about the pantomime:

‘Aladdin’ was an extremely entertaining show. The decor (by Frank Bridges [sic]) was superb and personalities shone. Teddy Weller, Pat Fox, Jimmy Levers, Les Atyeo, Johnny Branchflower etc. A pity it couldn’t be seen by stage lighting at night. Good songs sung by Jim Anderson and Val Ballantyne. ‘There’s a Valley at the end of the Rainbow’ ‘Bluebird of Happiness’ being No 1 hits.¹⁰⁵

It appears Rae Nixon had been able to coax Weller out of retirement by offering him the lead—this time a male role.



FIGURE 5.11. COSTUME RENDERING FOR THE
LEAD ROLES IN *ALADDIN*. RAE NIXON.
COURTESY OF ROBIN KALHORN.

The “Dutch Eurasian playing the part of the princess was excellent,” thought John Cosford, “and it was hard to realise that this ‘lovely girl’ was a man! Good God! How long had it been since we’d seen a real live white girl?”¹⁰⁶ Nixon’s persuasiveness had also brought “Sambal Sue” back for one last encore performance at Tamarkan.

Among the maintenance party workers on their way back to Nong Pladuk was G. F. Kershaw, who wrote glowingly about the brilliance of the performer playing Widow Twankey (“would have graced any London pantomime”) and was greatly taken by another N.E.I. female impersonator who appeared in the show: “A young Dutchman with a slim figure took the part of one of the court maidens, and had dressed in camp-made padded bra, figure-fitting pants, and a waist-to-ankle divided skirt made from the gauze part of a mosquito-net. He looked the part of a young and attractive female, both in dress and deportment.”¹⁰⁷

Prior to attending the late afternoon performance, Leslie Hall had been feeling extremely depressed, but after seeing the pantomime he recalled how the closing moments had produced a euphoric and overwhelmingly cathartic effect on the whole audience.

It was truly a professional performance and it drew to a close with a beautiful tenor voice rendering “The Bluebird of Happiness.” On his right wrist the singer had a mock-up blue and gold parrot which looked like the real thing from a distance and let colour to the rendition.¹⁰⁸

The unidentified singer with the “beautiful tenor voice” was none other than Ted Weller.

As dusk gathered around them—making it “all the more emotional,”¹⁰⁹ Weller remembered—he stood alone on the stage and sang:

*The beggar man and his mighty king are only different in name,
 For they are treated just the same by fate.
 Today a smile and tomorrow tears,
 We're never sure what's in store,
 So learn your lesson before too late, so*

*Be like I, hold your head up high
 Till you find a blue bird of happiness.
 You will find greater peace of mind
 Knowing there's a bluebird of happiness.*

*And when he sings to you,
 Though you're deep in blue,
 You will see a ray of light creep through . . .*

As he came to the final lines of the song, Weller inserted a crucial variation in the next to last line that “brought down the ‘house.’ Even the Nips voiced their approval, though they clearly didn’t understand the words.”¹¹⁰ With his silver tenor voice floating out into the gathering darkness, Weller sang,

*Keep alive, we'll be home in '45!
 Somewhere there's a bluebird of happiness.^{xiv}*

And with this “the men—even those amputees who could—rose to their feet to give this song a special ovation,” Hall recalled. “Tears flowed copiously and the only dry faces to be found were those of the uncomprehending guards.”¹¹¹

The Last Show

Following the Christmas celebrations, the tempo of the troop evacuation from Tamarkan to Chungkai stepped up. The Tamarkan Players would be among the last to leave. There was a repeat of *Aladdin* on New Year’s Day 1945. But after having their spirits lifted by the “Bluebird of Happiness” and their hopes for a swift end to the war raised by the Allied bombing attacks, now came the hard part. “Christmas over, the new year came and the endless waiting became increasingly difficult to bear,” bemoaned Hall.¹¹²

When it became clear that the Tamarkan Players had no follow-up to entertain the POWs waiting to be transferred to Chungkai, the indefatigable Eddie Edwins stepped forward and cobbled together an *All-Star Variety Show* that took place on 8 January. With himself as compère, Edwins drew performers

^{xiv} Words by Edward Heyman and Harry Parr Davies; music by Sandor Harmati.

from both the Tamarkan Players (Weller, Anderson, Ballantyne, Tony Gerrish and his dance band, etc.) and his Chungkai maintenance party (Larry Croisette and Fred Coles) for his production. As unbelievable as it sounds given the circumstances, he secured permission from the I. J. A. for stage lighting to be used during the show.¹¹³ It would be the last show ever performed in Tamarkan.

With the war going against them, the Japanese feared the possibility of uprisings led by POW officers, so at the beginning of February all officers in the Thai camps—and as far away as French Indochina—were separated from their men and sent to Kanburi/051 Kilo. Before leaving Tamarkan, Nixon secretly buried his precious sketchbook; he was not able to retrieve it until the war was over.¹¹⁴ By the end of the third week of February, all the remaining other ranks had been transferred to Chungkai and only a small contingent of I. J. A. soldiers was left to inhabit the camp and man the anti-aircraft gun emplacements guarding the two bridges.

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- 2 Nussbaum, 160.
- 3 Frank Samethini, 74–75.
- 4 Nussbaum, 160.
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- 6 Cosford, 103.
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- 8 Nussbaum, 160.
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- 10 Chalker, Letter, 27 November 1943.
- 11 Jacobs, 106.
- 12 Jacobs, 106.
- 13 Carter, 166.
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- 15 Jacobs, 152.
- 16 Jacobs, 106.
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- 18 Carter, 167.
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- 53 Jacobs, 106.
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- 59 Bancroft, 124–125.
- 60 Jacobs, 117.
- 61 Carter, 170.
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- 65 Carter, 170–171.
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- 70 Nixon, Sketchbook, SK-5.
- 71 Nixon, Sketchbook, SK-7.
- 72 Nixon, Sketchbook, SK-7.
- 73 Carter, 172.
- 74 Rivett, 326.
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- 76 Thompson, 108.
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- 95 Nixon, PIX, 9 February 1946, 17.
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- 105 Gee, Diary, 25 December 1944.
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- 107 Kershaw, 130.
- 108 Hall, 311.
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Chapter 6: “Chungkai Showcase”

Chungkai Hospital Camp

Part One: Mid-October 1942 to to Mid-May 1944



FIGURE 6.1. CHUNGKAI THEATRE LOGO. HUIB VAN LAAR. IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

Though POWs in other camps in Thailand produced amazing musical and theatrical offerings for their audiences, it was the performers in Chungkai who, arguably, produced the most diverse, elaborate, and astonishing entertainment on the Thailand-Burma railway. Between Christmas 1943 and May 1945 they presented over sixty-five musical or theatrical productions.

As there is more detailed information about the administration, production, and reception of the entertainment at Chungkai than at any other camp on the railway, the focus in this chapter will be on those productions and personalities that stand out in some significant way artistically, technically, or politically. To cover this material adequately, the chapter will be divided into two parts: Part One will cover the period from mid-October 1942 to mid-May 1944; Part Two, from mid-May 1944 to July 1945.

There was continual bustle in Chungkai at the beginning of February 1944 as the camp was enlarged to accommodate the POWs returning from up country construction sites and maintenance parties were being sent back up the line. What had everyone's attention, though, was the theatre about to re-open at its new location at the bottom of the slope in the Group IV area. The old platform stage was on flat land next to the parade ground. Now that nearly 12,000 POWs were in camp, it had become increasingly difficult for the thousands seated on the ground to see a show properly. The new theatre site commissioned by POW commandant Lieutenant-Colonel Cary Owtram was going to be a spectacular improvement.

As an amateur performer himself—he had a fine singing voice—Owtram well understood the value of a steady supply of organized entertainment for restoring and maintaining the morale of the troops in his care. If Chungkai’s “valiantly struggling concert party”¹ was going to succeed as a crucial part of his rehabilitation scheme, what they needed was a venue where shows could be more effectively staged and a seating area with good sightlines that could accommodate large audiences more comfortably.

When all was ready, the old stagehouse was “dismantled and re-erected” at its new location.² “It is a kind of outdoor amphitheatre with a raised mud platform and a trench dug in front for the orchestra,” observed Medical Officer Ian Mackintosh.³ The new site “affords all the spectators a good view of the stage,” wrote a delighted Lieutenant John Milford,⁴ to which Mackintosh added, “The acoustics are amazing for an outdoor space as even those sitting right at the back can hear perfectly.”⁵

The theatre opened on 4 February with a two-day festival showcasing the different entertainment groups in Chungkai. The lineup of performers included the Chungkai Orchestra, Colonel Cary Owtram, the Chungkai Chorus, and “Fizzer” Pearson’s “Radio Players.”

Lieutenant G. Stanley Gimson sketched one of these opening performances from the point of view of an audience member at the back of the crowded amphitheatre.

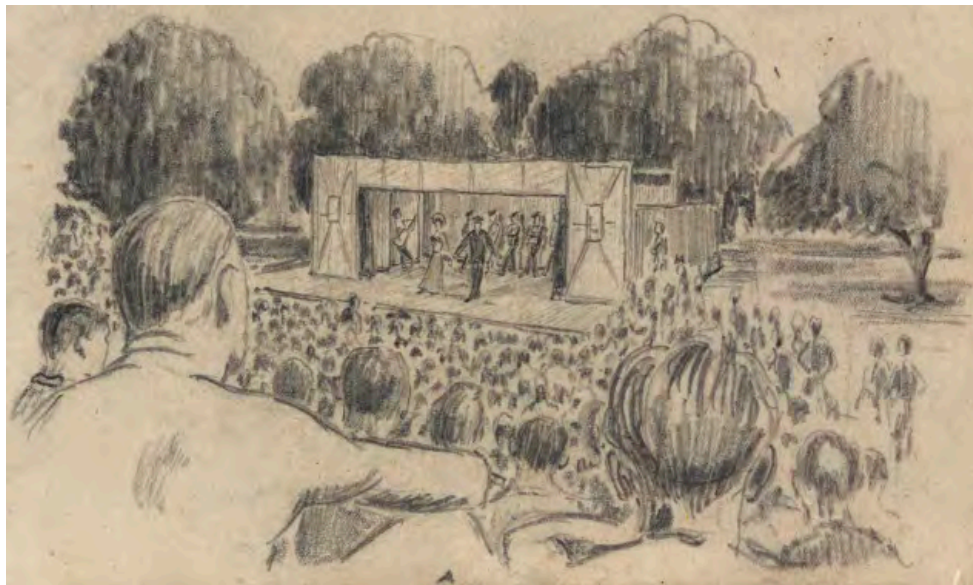


FIGURE 6.2. THE CHUNGKAI THEATRE. G. STANLEY GIMSON. IWM ART 16854. COURTESY OF THE FAMILY OF STANLEY GIMSON.

Gimson’s sketch shows the old open-air (roofless) proscenium-arched stagehouse on a raised platform at the bottom of a slope. (To learn more about this theatre, see Chapter 12: “Jolly Good Show!”)

Captain C. D. L. Aylwin of the Royal Marines was pleased that another concern about the audience’s comfort had been taken into account when choosing the theatre’s new location: “The audience no longer has the sun beating into its eyes. In the background are dark green mango trees and one tall tree which was recently in scarlet blossom. If bored with the show in progress, the trees contain plenty of natural life which is far from boring.”⁶ This “natural life,” according to Gimson, consisted of “chattering birds and flying tree-rats [squirrels].”⁷

Besides a ready-made topography, it was the position of the sun in relation to the stage and not the audience that had been a major factor in choosing the site. Since artificial lighting had been banned from

the old stage when Allied reconnaissance planes began to appear overhead, producers needed the slant of the afternoon and early evening sun to light their stage. Sixty years later, the experience of attending this theatre was still vivid in Jack Chalker's memory: "Concert evenings, with the vast audience of emaciated men sitting or lying in that great dusty bowl of the amphitheatre, were a moving sight."⁸ Life in Chungkai had not always been so agreeable.

Backstory: October 1942–February 1944

Chungkai POW camp was situated on the edge of the jungle across the Mae Khlong River from the provincial capital of Kanchanaburi. It was established in early October 1942 as headquarters for I. J. A. POW Administration Group II with Group Commandant Lieutenant-Colonel Shouichi Yanagida in charge and Lieutenant-Colonel J. R. Williamson as POW officer in charge. The Japanese had been warned by the local Thai population that the chosen camp site, at the convergence of the Mae Khlong and Kwai Noi rivers, was subject to severe flooding during the monsoon season, but this information was disregarded and construction went ahead.⁹ Between late 1942 and early 1944, Chungkai evolved from a work camp into a hospital camp and finally for those not in hospital, something resembling a holiday camp.

Work Camp. Chungkai was initially a work camp for the "Chungkai cutting"—a short but difficult stretch of the railway made by hand-chiseling and blasting through a hill of solid rock so the railway crossing the bridges over the Mae Khlong could pass through it.

In early November, members of the Mumming Bees concert party arrived in Chungkai from Singapore.ⁱ But the imperative to finish the cutting as soon as possible meant that only impromptu campfire entertainments were allowed on the few yasume days, although Laurie Allison remembered Frankie Quinton lifting the spirits of those in his hut with his cheery accordion music after a long day of hard work.

When more POWs arrived in Chungkai from Singapore, there was an excess of non-working officers, so the I. J. A. sent a number of them, including the actor-comedian Captain "Fizzer" Pearson and musical director Lieutenant Norman Smith, up the line to an all-officers camp in the Kanyu area. Pearson and Smith took several of the Mumming Bees performers with them, listed as "cooks" or "batmen," to provide entertainment in the construction camps.

For their first Christmas in captivity, the remaining Mumming Bees entertainers produced an original pantomime in the early afternoon on Christmas Day and a variety show that evening. One member of the throng of enthusiastic audience members at the panto *Rhythm on the River* observed: "And as we sat in the hot blazing sunshine with the sweat pouring down our backs we roared with delight at a pantomime that would have delighted a crowd of school children."¹⁰ Bobby Spong's appearance as the "tantalizing Jungle Princess" was "tumultuously received."¹¹

When work on the cutting was complete, members of the concert party were among the workers sent up the line.

Hospital Camp. After the first of the year, the heavy sick and dying began to arrive back in Chungkai from up country, and Chungkai was transformed into a base hospital camp. By the time Donald Smith arrived in March, the flood of sick had completely overwhelmed the medical authorities' ability to deal with them:

ⁱ This group included the general manager and producer Major Leofric Thorpe, the musical conductors Lieutenants Norman Smith and Eric Cliffe, producers Captain "Fizzer" Pearson and Corporal Leo Britt, female impersonators Bobby Spong and John "Nellie" Wallace, singer Sam Drayton, actors George Donnelly, Teddy Ingram and Nigel Wright, and the musicians Arthur Bradfield, Fred Coles, N. Kemp, Frankie Quinton, and Bill Bainbridge, among others.

ⁱⁱ Oddly enough, Major Leofric Thorpe, who had been one of the founders of the Mumming Bees, took no part in these early Chungkai productions. As an officer, he had worked on details inside the camp since his arrival, been laid low with a series of debilitating illnesses, and was now running one of the six cookhouses [Thorpe, Letter, 24 May 2000].

From the very moment I first set eyes on the place, my spirits began to fall. . . . The whole place bore an air of overpowering gloom and misery. Involuntarily I shuddered. It was almost as if we had entered a cold dark mortuary. As we moved farther into the camp, we passed little groups of prisoners. . . . All looked emaciated and ill. One man stood up near us, grinning vacantly. Then he raised a bony hand and pointed derisively at us. “Chungkai, Chungkai,” he chanted, “That’s where the Englishmen come to die!” The poor creature was mad. . . . What tragic place, in Heaven’s name, was this that we had been brought to?¹²

This was also the time when Jack Chalker arrived back in Chungkai from Kanyu suffering from recurring bouts of dysentery as well as malaria and dengue fever.¹³



FIGURE 6.3. “DYSENTERY WARD—VIEW FROM MY BED SPACE.” JACK CHALKER. COURTESY OF JACK CHALKER.

But Chungkai wasn’t only the place where Englishmen came to die; so did Australians and Dutch/Indonesians. Chungkai had become a death camp.

As “the Speedo” got under way, Group II Commandant Yanagida moved his headquarters from Chungkai up the line to the Tarsao area. Before leaving, he installed Lieutenant Yoshio Osata as I. J. A. commandant and replaced Lieutenant-Colonel Williamson (who would accompany him up the line) with Lieutenant-Colonel Sainter.

Over the next six months, various attempts were made to try to alleviate the boredom and despair. In late April, Colonel Sainter received Osata’s approval to form a small concert party that would perform twice weekly, once in the hospital wards and once for the whole camp.¹⁴

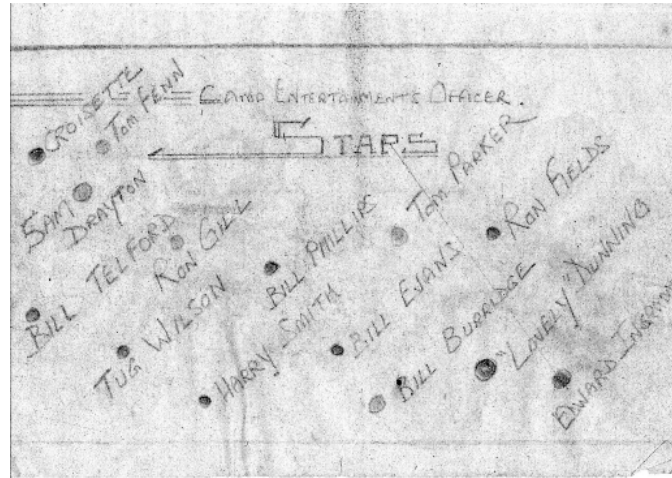


FIGURE 6.4. "THE BAM-BOOZ-LERS." PLAYBILL FOR OPENING SHOW. IWM Misc 90 Item 1323.

Hence, "The Bam-Booz-Lers." Among the company was cowboy singer Larry Croisette, who had been an original member of "The Optimists" when they were formed in England in 1940.ⁱⁱⁱ

In May, Lieutenant John D. V. Allum, former officer in charge of "The Harbour Lights" concert party in Keppel Harbour, Singapore (who had been recuperating in Chungkai since February), put on a show with the Bam-Booz-Lers that delighted the troops with its swing music, comedy sketches, and a radio "playlet."¹⁵

In June, Lieutenant-Colonel Cary Owtram took over as POW officer in charge from Colonel Sainter. As there was little energy to tackle anything other than attending to the ever-increasing numbers of heavy sick and dying sent down from the construction camps, there was little he could do to implement a more extensive welfare scheme. As there was yet no base camp for Group IV POWs, their sick were sent to Chungkai as well.

In July, Allum was transferred to Nong Pladuk, where he would become entertainment officer (see Chapter 7: "The Show Must Go On"). Despite efforts by those remaining in the Bam-Booz-Lers to carry on, conditions in Chungkai continued to deteriorate and the death toll continued to rise. On 8 August, Chalker reported that a newly arrived Dutch/Indonesian musician named Jimmy van Lingen livened up the camp with a "superb" solo guitar performance.¹⁶

ⁱⁱⁱ This concert party marks the beginning of Croisette's remarkable career in Chungkai, where, except for one maintenance party detail, he would continue to perform until the camp closed in the late spring of 1945.



FIGURE 6.5. JIMMY VAN LINGEN. PENCIL SKETCH BY STANLEY GIMSON.
IWM ART 16857. COURTESY OF THE FAMILY OF STANLEY GIMSON.

Ironically, this was the very day that Osata stopped all shows from taking place inside or outside the hospital in the belief that entertainment was not appropriate for a camp full of sick and dying men.¹⁷ But it was soon clear to everyone, including Osata, that his ban only made matters worse, so he reversed his decision and a week later sponsored an elaborate show combining POW, Japanese, and local Thai performers in an attempt to lift everyone's spirits.¹⁸ The aftereffects were only momentary. Two days later Chalker noted that barges appeared from the upriver camps "filled with the sick and dead."¹⁹

Convalescent Camp. In late September as the monsoon season passed, Colonel Owtram was finally able to implement his welfare scheme for those not in hospital or ambulatory. To relieve their boredom during the day, he encouraged them to participate in activities that would call upon their ingenuity and imagination, such as setting up cottage industries in shoe repair, tailoring, or arts and crafts projects—activities that would benefit the camp as well. Once a week after the evening meal, they could look forward to entertainment by their fledgling orchestra or small group of theatrical performers.

In early summer, musical conductor Norman Smith had been sent back to Chungkai to recover from amoebic dysentery and beriberi contracted up country. Now ambulatory, he immediately "sought out musicians . . . and with a few basic musical instruments zealously preserved by their owners"²⁰ established the beginnings of what he optimistically called an "orchestra." One of the Dutch/Indonesians recruited for his group was guitarist Jimmy van Lingen.

Though only a small ensemble, they were determined to perform and gave their first major concert in conjunction with the celebrations surrounding the joining of the Burma and Thai halves of the railway

on 17 October.^{iv21}



FIGURE 6.6. “THE EXILES.” DETAIL. NORMAN SMITH. HAN SAMETHINI COLLECTION. COURTESY OF ROBIN KALHORN.

Smith’s score for an original composition entitled “The Exiles,” written for one of these early concerts, reveals the composition of his “orchestra” in the fall of 1943: two violins, one clarinet, two trumpets, and one guitar.^{v22} [To listen to an electronic realization of this composition, access **Audio Link 6.1.**]

Audio



6.1

Over the next several months, as more POW musicians arrived in camp or were released from hospital—and with the donation of several instruments from the Red Cross and YMCA via the Swiss Consul in Bangkok²³—Smith’s orchestra grew to fifteen players: “5 fiddles, 2 guitars, 2 trumpets, 1 cornet, 2 drummers, 1 banjo, 1 clarinet, and 1 piano accordionist.”²⁴ The percussion instruments—a drum set and tympani—had been made in the camp out of scrounged materials. But the hoped-for camp-made bass viol—the subject of much speculation—would not make its appearance until March.^{vi}

It’s not clear when Eddie Edwins of the Royal Army Medical Corps started to produce shows on the platform stage that had been erected on the edge of the parade ground, but it had to be sometime in October. Edwins, a “cockney” other ranks from London’s East End, had a passion for Victorian music hall and variety theatre and entertained the troops with original monologues and songs.^{vii}

It was during his show in the hospital area on 12 November that the infamous “snake-incident”

^{iv} Chalker gives this date as 16 October but writes that his dating is sometimes fuzzy.

^v This score, written by hand on six large sheets of manuscript paper, was preserved by Han Samethini and passed down to his grandson, Robin Kalhorn, suggesting that the composition must have been played again when Samethini was in the orchestra.

^{vi} See Chapter 12: “Jolly Good Show!” for details on how these instruments were constructed.

^{vii} See “The FEPOW Songbook” for examples.

occurred.²⁵ When one member of the audience casually remarked to his neighbor that he had seen a snake drop from a nearby tree, “the entire audience rose to its feet and began to run without reason.”²⁶ The magician Fergus Anckorn, still convalescing from his burn wounds, was one of the unfortunate patients in the audience caught in the wake of this stampede. “I was pushed through two huts, with the crowd,” he remembered, “with the bedding and everything . . . right through.”²⁷ A number of recent amputees at the front of the audience were trampled upon.²⁸

After this incident, entertainment appears to have been halted temporarily, as Chalker doesn’t record another show until 1 December.²⁹

In late November/early December, two other theatrical producers and their troupes returned to Chungkai to enrich the entertainment offerings. One was “Fizzer” Pearson, who arrived on 27 November with his “Radio Players”^{viii} from Tamarkan, where they had been retained since March because Chungkai had been too overcrowded to take them in.³⁰ It was in one of his new Chungkai shows that Jack Chalker first appeared as a female character. His turn was not a success: “I remember clearly my trepidation when I appeared for the first time with “Fizzer” Pearson as a vicar’s daughter in a short burlesque. . . . I remember clearly that there was no proscenium or theatre structure for that occasion—only that we were on a higher level than the audience.”³¹

Being cast as a young woman caused Chalker some embarrassment. But that wasn’t the worst of it. “I had to sit down during this small vignette,” he remembered, “and not being properly versed in the ways of women I sat with my legs apart and not together.”³² But with a rough POW audience, this youthful ignorance did not go unnoticed: “all the people in the front row said, ‘Close your legs!’ And . . . I remember being so embarrassed, first of all, doing a part like that, and then, secondly, so damn dead wrong.”³³

The other producer was Joop Postma, who arrived with members of his cabaret troupe and a large number of Dutch/Indonesian POWs at the beginning of December. They had been performing in the N.E.I. hospital wards up the line beyond Kinsaiyok.³⁴ Finding that Chungkai had a stage, Postma immediately asked if his troupe could use it for a “grand concert” in celebration of St. Nicholas Eve (5 December).³⁵ His request met with resistance. Since his performers could not perform in English, it was argued, the British POWs would not be able to enjoy the show. An argument ensued.

In the end the Christmas spirit prevailed with a compromise in which British performers would join forces with Dutch/Indonesian entertainers to make the show more “accessible” for the camp as a whole.³⁶ The Dutch/Indonesians built a proscenium arch at the front of the stage^{ix} that became a permanent part of the structure.³⁷ But the contentious issue of Dutch/Indonesians gaining access to the stage to perform for the whole camp would not disappear.

Lieutenant Kokubo Takes Charge

On 15 December, Group Commander Yanagida made an inspection of the camp from his new up country headquarters at Takanun that resulted in Lieutenant Osata being replaced as camp commandant by Lieutenant Kokubo.^x Compared to Osata, who had “proved to be quite reasonable,”³⁸ Kokubo had a mercurial personality. When he drank heavily, which was often, no Korean guard was safe from his merciless

viii The female impersonator Bobby Spong, singer Sam Drayton, comedian Eric Griffiths-Jones, accordionist Fred Coles, and a few others.

ix The actual translation from the Dutch for this passage is, “in the front we made two pillars made of prupuk,” employing an Indonesian term unknown to translator Sheri Tromp. Given what we know about the structure of the stagehouse that was moved to its new site in early February 1944, it makes sense that this unknown word would refer to a proscenium arch.

x There is little agreement in the POW literature about the spelling of this Japanese commandant’s name. It is also seen as “Kokabu,” “Kokubu,” and “Kokobo.”

beatings³⁹ or no thing safe from his sword: “[Kokabu] in drunken but genial frenzy of swordsmanship attacks and decapitates three banana trees.”⁴⁰ But Kokubo, it turned out, was a lover of music, which would prove a blessing to Norman Smith and his orchestra as well as to the future development of entertainment generally, and Owtram was able to establish a good working relationship with him as he had with Osata.

The Christmas Holidays 1943

For Christmas Day 1943, “Fizzer” Pearson produced an elaborate two-hour variety show accompanied by Norman Smith’s orchestra that showcased all the British musical and theatrical talent in the camp, including a fully recovered Fergus Anckorn, who gave his first and only Chungkai performance as the magician “Wizardus.”⁴¹ The next day, Eddie Edwins put on a pantomime version of the Snow White story, *So Tite and the Seven Twirps*, that Ernest Gordon called “inspired nonsense . . . with our guards as the villains and Snow White as the spirit of innocence. The Japanese, who were self-invited guests, had no notion that they were the butt of the jokes, and laughed and applauded with the rest of us.”⁴² It was these overcrowded Christmas performances, with thousands in attendance struggling to see and hear properly, that convinced Owtram something had to be done about their theatre’s inadequacies to help the POWs survive the long months of incarceration ahead.

New Year’s Day 1944 was primarily devoted to sporting events, although, as John Cosford observed, “There were very few men anywhere fit enough to take part.”⁴³ Bobby Spong, as usual, was present at the horse race playing his onstage role off stage, much to the delight of most, if not all, of the troops: “Bobby Spong (female impersonator) was kissing the winners of races,” observed Lieutenant J. A. Richardson. “All rather distasteful!”⁴⁴

A New Theatre

Shortly after the holidays were over, Owtram followed through on his plan to rectify the camp’s inadequate theatre space:

Accordingly I selected a small, shallow valley near the river bank and outlined my idea of having a stage built on one slope and the auditorium formed on the other. This was acted upon and gangs of willing volunteers spent hours digging rising tiers of seats for the audience and building up a level platform for the stage.⁴⁵

Theatre Committee

As construction on the new theatre site began, Owtram organized a committee to facilitate its operation:

Chairman	Lieutenant-Colonel Owtram
Stage Manager	Alec Knight
Lighting	Gerald Angier
Set Construction	Peter G. Bambridge

^{xi} Three performers from the old Bam-Booz-Lers concert party were in the cast: Bob “Lovely” Dunning as So-Tite, Larry Croisette as Queen Nopeen, and Tom Parker as Prince Archie.

Hand Props, Publicity,
 & Box Office R. S. Thwaites
 Hospital Welfare Officer^{xiii} Eddie Edwins

These six men comprised the permanent members of the theatre committee. They would supply the administrative and technical support necessary to run the theatre. Except for Edwins, all the committee personnel were officers. All were British. Owtram would function as chair until the committee and theatre were fully operational.

The designated areas of responsibility indicate what growth and developments were anticipated in the theatre's operation. (With no committee assignment for scenic artists and wardrobe staffs, each concert party would continue to be responsible for these.)

One area needs further explanation. When the need for props quickly moved beyond hand props to include furniture and set dressing, this bundling of responsibilities would prove too burdensome for Thwaites and a new committee member would be added so he would only be responsible for Front of House (box office, ushers) and publicity.

Once the theatre at its new location became fully operational, a box office for booking reserved seating would solve the current unruly situation in which POWs reserved their seat by placing a personal item in their preferred spot on a first-come, first-served basis. For those who could not afford to reserve a seat, there would be standing-room-only areas available at the back and sides.

In a camp the size of Chungkai, publicity beyond word of mouth was a necessity. Other than a staff artist for signage, talented graphic artists were commissioned on a freelance basis to produce hand-drawn and -painted posters. Since these posters were individually produced, variations in wording and images were common. Art supplies came from privately held stocks or scrounged materials or were purchased in Kanburi through guards (for a price). By 11 February, these artists were also producing souvenir programs for sale, another way to generate money for production budgets.^{xiii46}

For rehearsals, the theatre committee secured two spaces: the "Bamboo Rehearsal Theatre," situated in a clearing in a grove of slender arching bamboo, and "the 'Slaughter House Rehearsal Theatre,'" in a "clearing [where] the butchers had formerly performed the gruesome task of killing the camps' meat with a sledgehammer."⁴⁷

What days of the week and times of day shows could be performed were determined by the I. J. A. camp administration. The present arrangement was Friday and Saturday between the evening meal and lights out, with each evening devoted to a performance by a different group.

Two New Arrivals

While Owtram's theatre was under construction, two men who would make a significant difference in the POWs' lives arrived in Chungkai.

One of these men was the musician Han Samethini, emaciated and suffering from malaria and tropical ulcers on his legs, who limped into camp on crutches still clutching his accordion. Han had been part of Joop Postma's hospital entertainers up beyond Kinsaiyok. Spotted by his brother, Frank, who was in Chungkai on detached duty from Tamarkan helping construct huts for new arrivals, Han was immediately taken to hospital.⁴⁸

^{xii} John Coast's memoir for early March 1944 provides this information, which, except for the chair, would be substantially the same committee that Owtram constituted two months earlier [Coast, 175].

^{xiii} The poster and program covers used as illustrations in this chapter will identify these remarkable artists.



FIGURE 6.7. HANS SAMETHINI AT CHUNGKAI. DETAIL OF *WONDER BAR* PHOTOGRAPH. COURTESY OF MARTIN PERCIVAL.

Under his brother's nurturing care, Han began to recover. Though still too weak to walk, one day he told Frank he could now "play for the boys if they want him to." Of course they wanted him to. One evening he was carried on a stretcher to the theatre, placed on a chair, and given his accordion. A large crowd had gathered to hear him play.

"For a moment or two his fingers run tentatively over the keyboard of his old accordion," recalled Frank. "A hush has fallen over the audience. Then—up spring and sparkle the notes, rising and tumbling down."⁴⁹ After a few moments the audience "burst forth into singing." They sang all the old songs—the music "touching the hardened souls of these ragged, skinny people drawn together in close unity. A unity which goes beyond the boundaries of rank and standing." After singing "Auld Lang Syne" at the close of the concert, "the men walk back to their quarters, contented, for had they not, for a little while at least, beaten the enemy?"⁵⁰ As soon as he was walking again, Samethini was recruited by Norman Smith for his orchestra.

The other new person was Lieutenant-Colonel Weary Dunlop, who had turned around the death camp at Tarsao with his reorganization of the hospital and his welfare schemes. As the camp's new senior medical officer, Dunlop would try to effect the same change on the chaotic hospital situation in Chungkai.⁵¹ Dunlop's efforts in getting the patients involved in their own recovery and his promotion of entertainment as a vital part of the rehab process coincided with Owtram's ongoing welfare program, and the two men complemented each other well in running the camp. Though seriously ill men would continue to die, Chungkai would no longer be known as the place where Englishmen, or anyone else, came to die.

Chungkai "Holiday Camp"

When the POWs returned to Chungkai from their up country work camps at the beginning of 1944, they were stunned to find the camp they had left months earlier completely transformed into

something resembling a “holiday camp.”^{xiv} There was a flourishing Thai canteen⁵² and an N.E.I. stall selling hot and spicy sambals, a remedial physical therapy center, a barber shop, soccer field, and tennis courts (for officers only), various cottage industries (cobbler, tailor, metal smithy), vegetable gardens, officer and administrative huts with small flower gardens in front, and a POW Military Police Force with its own separate quarters.⁵³ Among the approved “rackets” were coffee stalls (burnt rice) and cigarette factories. “Scores of men, unfit for manual work, are being employed by the ‘factories,’” wrote Frank Samethini, “the entire profit of which is donated to the hospital fund. On ‘concert’ days the theatre ground resounds with the calls of cigarette dealers, all for obvious reasons picked from non-smokers.”⁵⁴ To top it off, a new theatre was under construction.

Even so, there was one reality about life in Chungkai that the POWs there could never ignore: “For the hospital and the sick were always with us, though often they lay curiously apart, and we kept them deliberately in our mental backgrounds,” wrote John Coast.⁵⁵

Standards of Performance

With musical and variety shows occurring on a weekly basis, audience expectations about performance standards began to rise and complaints about lack of quality began to be heard. Richardson voiced his concern about the overall quality of entertainment available in camp: “usually not very good. Strange that out of 7000 troops (excluding those in hospital) that there is not more talent. Norman Smith, Musical Director; band not too bad.”⁵⁶

Colonel Owtram was well aware of the problem. With no rehearsal time allowed other than during the leisure period after the evening meal, the Chungkai entertainers were having a hard time developing new material and improving their performances. If entertainment was going to continue as an important part of the “rehabilitative” process, then both the performers’ skills and the shows’ content needed to improve—and that meant more time for rehearsal free from other duties.

The musicians, at least, were in luck. Owtram was able to persuade Lieutenant Kokubo that the quality of musical concerts would improve if the musicians could count rehearsals as their daily camp duties.⁵⁷ For orchestra co-conductor Eric Cliffe, Kokubo’s approval was a godsend: “The Japanese Camp Commandant was generous with regard to rehearsals, permitting the orchestra to practice all morning and allowing afternoon rehearsals to be held in hospital wards for the benefit of those too ill to walk to the camp theatre on the concert night.”⁵⁸

But Owtram was unable to effect the same arrangement for the theatrical producers and performers. They would continue to rehearse in the evenings after their daily chores were finished.

Maintenance Parties

But one perk for all those involved in entertainment was being kept off drafts for maintenance parties. As the new year wore on, more “requests” for POWs to be sent back up the line on maintenance parties occurred. Who went on these parties and who did not involved tricky political decisions. “The British administration,” Lieutenant Richard Sharp wrote, “try as far as possible to send those who have, for one reason or another, escaped going up country before. But it becomes increasingly impossible.”^{xv}⁵⁹ Assignment to one of these maintenance parties was a fate to be avoided, if possible, at all cost, and the

^{xiv} According to POW Laurie Allison, a “holiday camp” is a unique British institution where people go to participate in highly structured daily events including physical education. Some camps even had beauty salons, bars, and professional theatres.

^{xv} The POW commandant would give the directive, but the actual list would be drawn up by a group of officers representing the various military units/constituencies in the camp for him to approve.

politicking behind the scenes must have been fierce.

Involvement in entertainment activities became one of the legitimate means to avoid this duty and proved useful in recruiting performers and technical crews for the productions. Lieutenant Terry Morris, who had been in Leofric Thorpe's and Leo Britt's productions back in Changi, readily admitted his relief when asked to join Pearson's Players: "For myself, despite a badly ulcered leg, frequent gastro-enteric troubles and persistent malaria, was delighted to get off any maintenance work on the railway!"⁶⁰

An illegitimate means was to contact one of the POW "entrepreneurs" in the dysentery ward who had a racket selling stool samples to fit men so they could "toss the doctor" by proving they weren't healthy enough to be sent up country on a working party.⁶¹

For those in hospital, the greatest fear was being released back into the general populace, which made them subject to drafts. Ambulatory patients, who were allowed out into the camp during the day, were the most vulnerable. One of those patients, Sapper^{xvi} Geoffrey Gee, knew firsthand that some medical officers were complicit in keeping men off these drafts: "Capt [Dudley] Gotla's leaving me so long in hospital—thus keeping me from manual labour and what's more important, from going 'up country'—perhaps saving my life, who knows? A big thing!"⁶²

End of Backstory: Reprise

By the time the gala performances celebrating the opening of the new theatre took place on 4–5 February 1944, there was gathered in Chungkai a nucleus of talented individuals—officers and other ranks—who, along with others arriving daily from up country, would transform the camp into a musical and theatrical showcase. Producers would stretch the boundaries of what could be presented and what audiences would accept; designers and technicians would test the limits of their resources and ingenuity.

Shortly after the theatre's reopening, Owtram turned over the chair of the theatre committee to Lieutenant-Colonel E. L. V. Mapey.⁶³ As the months passed, the committee's membership expanded in personnel and responsibilities in response to producers' needs and the entertainment offerings.

The development of entertainment in Chungkai is a story fraught with all the elements of good drama: comedy, tragedy—and farce. To tell this story adequately, the arc of Chungkai's entertainment activity from this point forward is divided into four sections: 1. "The First and the Best" (February to mid-May 1944), 2. "Rain Must Fall" (mid-May to early October 1944), 3. "Outward Bound" (mid-October 1944 to March 1945), and 4. "We Are Invincible!" (March to July 1945). Periodic updates will track the playhouse's evolution, the social and political context in which productions occur, and the appearance of new personnel who make a significant contribution to the Chungkai entertainment scene.

1. "The First and the Best"

A "High-Brow" Concert

One week after the gala opening, a performance took place that could not have happened without the rehearsal time recently approved by Lieutenant Kokubo: a concert of semi-classical and classical music.

Eric Cliffe joined Norman Smith on the podium for this concert as he had for similar shows back in Changi in 1942.^{xvii} Their interests in music were quite different. "On the musical side, there were two

^{xvi} "Sapper" is the lowest rank for an other ranks engineer.

^{xvii} This is Cliffe's first known appearance in Chungkai, although he might have conducted some classical pieces in earlier concerts in the fall of 1943.

outstanding people,” wrote Richard Sharp. “Norman Smith, whose brusque good nature and common sense smoothed many a situation, and who had an unusual facility for light and dance music; and Eric Cliffe, who saved the captivity for classical musicians.”⁶⁴

As a professor at the London Conservatory of Music before enlistment, it was Cliffe’s contention that the POWs needed more than a steady diet of popular music; they needed “good music” that was, he believed, ultimately more satisfying.⁶⁵

With this concert, Richardson thought the content and quality of the orchestra’s performance had vastly improved: “Norman Smith and Eric Cliffe conducting; a very good show. Played: Finlandia and Henry VIII Dances; well rendered. Jerry Clarke sang; the best item and the most heavily applauded.”⁶⁶ Arthur Johnston, who also thought the concert “wonderful,” questioned why so many musical events had taken place in Chungkai “and was informed that the Japanese Commandant was very musical himself, and had made a point with his superiors, that as a ‘recuperation’ camp it was good for his *own* men who also enjoyed it (and obviously didn’t really understand the heavily laid on irony at times; or preferred to ignore it) as well as getting much better work from the P.O.W’s. A good psychologist, and for which we were very grateful.”⁶⁷

The acknowledgment that Kokubo (and, by implication, other Japanese camp commandants as well) believed the shows were good for their own troops’ morale disturbed some POWs that their entertainment could be perceived as “Jap Happy,” which might be misconstrued as aiding and abetting the enemy.

Postma’s Unfinished Business

In his final remarks on the classical concert, Johnston included an intriguing observation: “Different groups competing for right to appear.”⁶⁸ Among unknown others, this comment certainly referred to Joop Postma and his Dutch/Indonesian cabaret.

When Postma discovered that his group was excluded from the gala performances on the theatre’s reopening, he petitioned the theatre committee once again for the right to perform for the whole camp—and was again rebuffed with the same argument heard back in December:

[Performing for the whole camp] was not allowed because they said, “The Dutch understand the English language, but the British don’t understand the Dutch at all.” That was logical and, of course, a little stupid because, after all, if you bring a show for everyone, that everyone can enjoy, with dances and funny songs and even communal singing, it has to be enjoyable. I said, “You also bring short skits, and we are supposed to understand them; not every Dutchman speaks English.”⁶⁹

Behind Postma’s remarks is a subtext of the prejudice the Dutch/Indonesians endured in the British-controlled camp—a fact Richardson readily acknowledged: “I should add that the Dutch, many of whom were *Indische Jongen* (i.e. Mixed Bloods) were not generally held in high esteem by the British and were anathema particularly to the Aussies. Animosities were sometime acute. Latent feelings tend to become blatantly overt under stressful circumstances; and our general conditions were indeed stressful.”⁷⁰

Though only a private in the N.E.I., Postma was a feisty individual and not willing for the Dutch/

Indonesian entertainers to accept second-class status:

In the beginning we were not allowed to perform. I was mad and told them, “If we are not allowed to perform, you won’t have the chance either, because I am going to sabotage the thing.” The consequence of this was that I had to appear before the Japanese camp commander. Major Metser accompanied me, and we came to an agreement: once a month we were allowed to bring our own show.⁷¹

Postma’s threat worked, and the N.E.I. troupe won their right to perform for the whole camp. The theatre committee was forced to add Major Metser to its board and to create a revised schedule for rehearsal spaces, performance dates, and resources to accommodate this additional group.

“Het Hollandsche Cabaret”



FIGURE 6.8. “HET HOLLANDSCHE CABARET”
COFOUNDERS. HUIB VAN LAAR COLLECTION. IMAGE
COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

Postma cofounded “Het Hollandsche Cabaret” with Philip “Flip” Brugman and Ferry van Delden. Brugman described their different areas of responsibility: “Joop Postma was the leader who, besides taking the direction, also looked after the comical pieces. I had the job of choreography, because I had been involved with folk and ballet dancing before the war. The musical part was totally in the hands of Han Samethini. The songs were made by Ferry van Delden and Puck Jonkmans looked after the costumes.”⁷²

Holland Zingt Weer! (Holland Sings Again)

On 12 February, the evening following Smith and Cliffe's concert, Postma's troupe performed their first cabaret for the whole camp. Han Samethini had secured Norman Smith's permission to have the orchestra's drummer and violinists join him in the pit.⁷³

British expectations about the worth and success of this Dutch concert were not very high, but they were in for a surprise. Gimson admitted that he had "attended the Dutch concert largely as a lesson—but enjoyed it immensely."⁷⁴ Richardson was completely bowled over by it:

Then the Dutch gave a "Hollandsck Konzert" very well arranged with superb dance ensembles; the "women" were magnificent, tremendously superior to our British female impersonators. Indeed, my good friend Glencross expressed his reaction thus; "my first feeling of lust in two years!" So considering the debilitating [*sic*] and virtually desexing effects of a prolonged rice diet, this was an eloquent acknowledgement of excellence of the "girls'" performance.⁷⁵

Geoffrey Gee also thought the "women" were terrific: "Grand musical finale of 'Mama me quiero' with gorgeous Jackie Stoenhoesen [Joqui Steenhuizen] as Carmen Miranda. Oo, la, la!"⁷⁶

The audience's enthusiastic response to the Dutch/Indonesian production, and especially to the sexiness of their female impersonators, must have set British entertainers' teeth on edge. In their first all-camp production, the N.E.I. performers had more than proven their point and their worth. The British now found themselves in competition with the Dutch/Indonesians over which of them could produce the best entertainment.

Pearson's Unwitting Challenge

The following week, on 18 February, Pearson's Players presented P. G. Wodehouse's comedy *Good Morning Bill*—a play of wit and style but without much substance. Pearson played the male lead opposite Bobby Spong as the female lead. Jack Chalker played the maid, Marie.

The audience loved it. Both Weary Dunlop and C. D. L. Aylwin thought the play had been extremely funny and the cast particularly well chosen.⁷⁷ In addition, Aylwin was pleased with the attention paid to production values: "The details of the properties had been well thought out."⁷⁸

It was an evening of firsts: the first production of a straight play^{xviii} in Chungkai, the first fully staged with setting and props, and the first time both Friday and Saturday night performances were allocated to the same producing organization. With Chungkai's huge POW population, the theatre committee had changed its programming policy so that more troops would have the opportunity to see a particular show. But at the most that meant only 5,000 out of an estimated 8-12,000 men could attend a show.

With the production of this play, the British entertainers realized they had an advantage over their Dutch/Indonesians counterparts, as the majority of audience members were English speakers. Because of the language barrier, Postma's troupe couldn't possibly attempt to produce a straight play. Straight plays, therefore, would become Pearson's strong suit—and since no accommodation would be made for those who didn't understand English, the plays might discourage their attendance.

^{xviii} Non-musical theatre.

Camp Update

In addition to POWs continuing to arrive from up country camps and the coming and going on maintenance parties, on 19 February the POW Administration received orders to put together a party of 900 fit officers and men for deployment to Japan.⁷⁹ Additional calls for Japan Party drafts would continue into June.

To relieve congestion—as well as the competition between two I. J. A. administrations in the same camp—the Group IV POWs would be moved downriver to a new base camp being established at Tamuang/039 Kilo. And Weary Dunlop was told that his medical staff should start drawing up lists for all the heavy sick in Group II to be sent to the large hospital for the chronically ill at Nakhon Pathom. Lacking specific instructions, Dunlop decided to include all those suffering from chronic amoebic dysentery as well.⁸⁰ The evacuation of these POWs would have adverse effects on the future of entertainment in Chungkai.

With the huge number of POWs in Chungkai, Kokubo finally allowed the theatre committee and the production staff to be officially listed as “theatre workers,” which meant that rehearsals, building sets and costumes, and so on would be considered their only day jobs in camp, protecting them from the dreaded maintenance and Japan Parties.⁸¹ With this change, the quality of entertainment in Chungkai improved beyond anyone’s imagining.

New Competitors: Leo Britt and the “Takanun Gang”

In the final draft of POWs arriving back in Chungkai from up country were Leo Britt, Gus Harffey, and the officers and men of the “Takanun Concert Party.” Chungkai, they discovered, had changed greatly in their absence. Along with the other camp amenities, it had a marvelous proscenium theatre and a flourishing theatre scene dominated by producer “Fizzer” Pearson, with Eddie Edwins and Joop Postma close behind. “Into the middle of this set-up,” observed John Coast, “strode our producer and professional, Leo Britt.”⁸² And he immediately wanted in on the action.

Coast’s characterization of the “maestro’s” movement as a “stride,” not a “walk,” as well as his designation as a “professional” is enough to suggest trouble ahead. The entertainment world at Chungkai was about to change once again, becoming more complex, more competitive—and more exciting.

With the arrival of these entertainers—derisively labeled the “Tak-a-nun gang” by those already in Chungkai—the theatre committee expressed some hope that Pearson’s and Britt’s groups might “blend” into a single concert party.⁸³ After all, Pearson and Britt had been together in the Mummie Bees back in Changi. But for almost a year and a half they had been separated and during that time had formed their own companies—“blending” was not in their vocabulary. But rivalry was. The “Takanun Gang” was added to the concert party roster, the performance schedule was revised once again, and representatives from each group were included on the committee in an advisory capacity so they could argue for and protect their interests.^{xix}

To prevent fights taking place over the casting pool, Pearson and Britt worked out an agreement that their performers could be available to either one of them. “In spite of it all,” Richard Sharp noted, “entertainment went on and no throats were cut.”⁸⁴ Since Pearson, Edwins, and Postma had already staked out their artistic territory, Britt’s “Takanun Players” would present revues and musical comedies.⁸⁵

From Frank Samethini’s perspective, it was not the competition between the British groups that caused concern, but that between the British and Dutch concert parties: “A state of rivalry exists between

xix I have not found any reference in the FEPOW literature to “voting” or “non-voting” members of the committee, so this is a “best practices” guess from my experience of how these types of committees operate. It’s not clear from the sources whether the Dutch/Indonesians were included in this arrangement.

the British and the Dutch stage groups performing in the camp's amphitheatre, both of them having set as their goal not only to entertain the men but also to outdo the opponent by presenting a better show.”⁸⁶

“Ollanda Number One Show”

With their next production, Postma and his cabaret troupe mobilized their theatrical arsenal against the British entertainers. Besides “Jackie” Steenhuizen’s sexual allure, Te Tovey’s sets and Puck Jonkmans’ costumes would “wow” the audience.



FIGURE 6.9. UNFINISHED POSTER FOR *1001 NACHT*. HUIB VAN LAAR. IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

Billed as “Het Grootste Lach Success in Thailand,” *1001 Nacht* (1001 Nights) opened on 18 March. Gee found the show “very enjoyable and amusing.”⁸⁷ John Sharp thought it was “particularly noteworthy for the care expended on the costumes and décor.”⁸⁸ And Jack Chalker was so impressed with the settings that he drew thumbnail sketches in his diary of the “Persian” and “Arab” scenes that also included a stick figure of one of the “‘sand’ dancers.”^{xx89}

xx “Sand” dancing was the specialty of Wilson, Keppel, and Betty, a famous 1930s British variety act in which sand spread in the performance area heightened the sound of the soft-shoe routine of strange Egyptian hieroglyphic-like movements and gestures.



FIGURE 6.10. SKETCH OF SCENES FROM *1001 NACHT*. COURTESY OF JACK CHALKER.

To guarantee their success, Postma staged “a master coup, with the support of the camp’s M. P. force”^{xxi}—an incident Frank Samethini gleefully recorded:

Dutchie-girl Johnny [“Jackie” Steenhuizen] had been making his debut on the stage playing the part of a “lush” doing a tango dance in a cabaret scene. The artificial bust, made to the last detail, the wig of shoulder-long wavy hair, the distinctive feminine sway of his hips in the dance—it all looked disturbingly real. Then at a certain pre-arranged moment members of the M.P. force had jumped on the stage, loudly demanding the surrender of that Thai-girl in the play who had slipped past the guard. The Japs among the audience, never missing a show, had obligingly fallen for it. Stopping the performance they had rushed backstage, angrily ordering on-the-spot-evidence which would leave no room for doubt as to Johnny’s sex.

Shaking their heads the Japs returned convinced, and impressed, to their seats ordering the continuance of the “Ollanda Number One Show.”⁹⁰

^{xxi} Military Police Force—organized by the POW administration to self-police against bootlegging. It wasn’t very effective.



FIGURE 6.11. TANGO DANCERS. PETER VAN VELTHUYSEN. IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

With “undisputed acclaim from friend and foe,” Samethini wrote, the Dutch had scored a “decisive advantage over the British.”⁹¹ Besides this masterful ruse which escalated the rivalry, Postma extended the competition into the areas of costumes and sets. But from the “borehole” rumors Frank Samethini heard, it had really become a contest between female impersonators:

Bobby and Johnny [Jackie Steenhuizen], respectively the British and Dutch impersonators of the “woman” in the show[s], are under no circumstances interchangeable.

There is too much bad blood between the “girls.” Some say because of an instant mutual dislike, others say jealousy of their personal wardrobe had been the cause for the feud.⁹²

Their feud was about more than that. It was about who would be recognized as the most glamorous female impersonator in Chungkai.

Leo Britt Gets into the Act

In the meantime, Leo Britt lost no time trying to establish himself as the “professional” producer-director and not an “amateur” like everyone else. If he and his Takanun “gang” were going to enter the contest for top billing, then he intended to win. And it wouldn’t be just over the Dutch/Indonesians but over the other British producers as well. His troupe’s first offering in Chungkai would be a revival of their recent Takanun triumph, Carl Moser’s *Animal Crackers*.

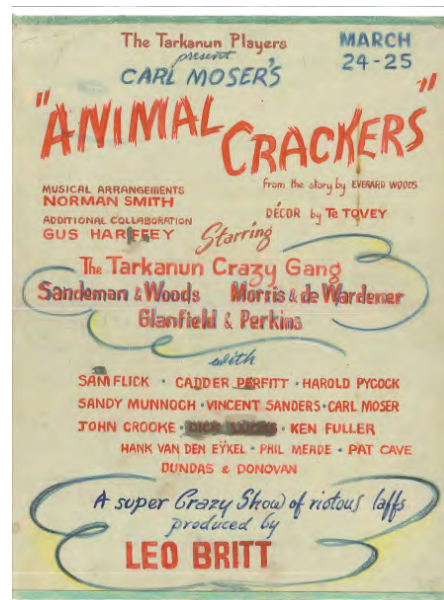


FIGURE 6.12. POSTER FOR *ANIMAL CRACKERS*. COURTESY OF HUGH DE WARDENER.

Animal Crackers opened on 24 March for an unprecedented run of three consecutive nights.⁹³ Britt's takeover as producer-director from Moser, who had written and directed the original production, wasn't the only change made to guarantee the revival's success. Instead of Gus Harffey, Norman Smith led the orchestra and received credit for the musical arrangements, with Harffey acknowledged only for "Additional Collaboration,"^{xxii} and John Coast, who had been the prompter for this show in Takanun, was asked by Britt to assume the duties of assistant stage manager (ASM), even though, as he acknowledged, "we instinctively disliked one another."^{xxiii}⁹⁴ The cast, on the other hand, contained all the regulars from the Takanun production, including the Dutch musician Hank van den Eykel.

Even with the change in artistic staff, the revival of *Animal Crackers* had difficulty living up to all its pre-show hype. Selby Milner saw it as "a knockabout, farcical affair of the very broadest slapstick humour, more acceptable to the men than to officers."⁹⁵ Richardson, on the other hand, thought it had "good slap-stick but needed better production."⁹⁶ For Gee, the whole production fell "a little short of expectation."⁹⁷

Though Britt did not score a total victory with the show, John Coast did. With his expert skills as assistant stage manager on view, the theatre committee asked him to take over Alec Knight's role as stage manager so Knight could become the theatre's general manager.⁹⁸ Thus Coast acquired a full-time camp job that guaranteed he would not be sent off on maintenance parties or to Japan.

A New Face: Geoffrey Gee

Up to this point Sapper Geoffrey Gee had no connection with the camp entertainment, although his talents as a graphic artist had already been recognized, and he was producing announcements for various camp events.⁹⁹

^{xxii} One wonders how all this went down with Harffey

^{xxiii} The ASM is the stage manager who works with the show in the rehearsal stage.



FIGURE 6.13. GEOFFREY GEE. PHOTOGRAPH. COURTESY OF KAREEN J. RODGERS.

On 25 March, Gee got an offer of a different sort:

I'd a visit from Sam [Drayton] and Frankie [Quinton] with an amazing proposition which left me in rather a quandary. Eddie [Edwins] is getting up a permanent little concert party of 5 or 6 to visit the hospital—5 shows, 3 days a week. This will be a sort of pierrot troupe^{xxiv} and at present they are short of a female (my angle!). Would I care to fill the breach? Be the one? In many ways I should enjoy it, but feel I haven't the necessary confidence to carry it off, nor have I any talent such as singing, impersonations, etc. etc. which to me seems so all-essential. The two main things to make me hesitate are 1 Will it bring about my discharge from hospital? Undesirable. and 2 Will it cause my friends etc. to take the piss out of me and thus lose caste? Anyway, I agreed to a try out if and when I'm required so left it at that. Time will tell.¹⁰⁰

Time did tell. Gee never got to perform as a female impersonator, but over the next sixteen months he became involved in the world of Chungkai entertainment as a poster and scenic artist, and his observations on the musical and theatrical productions, on the performers, and on backstage life become one of our most important sources of information on these activities.

^{xxiv} Entertainers who performed at British seaside resorts

“Fizzer” Pearson Returns with *The Circle*

On 31 March, Chungkai audiences saw “Fizzer” Pearson’s production of Somerset Maugham’s sophisticated drawing-room comedy *The Circle*. Besides Pearson, the seven-person cast included Bobby Spong, Eric Griffiths-Jones, Gus Harffey, Nigel Wright, Roy Randolph, and Douglas Mitchell. To set the tone with appropriate pre-show and entr’acte music, Eric Cliffe led the Chungkai theatre orchestra. In response to the Dutch challenge on production values, special effort was put into the setting and costumes.^{xxv}

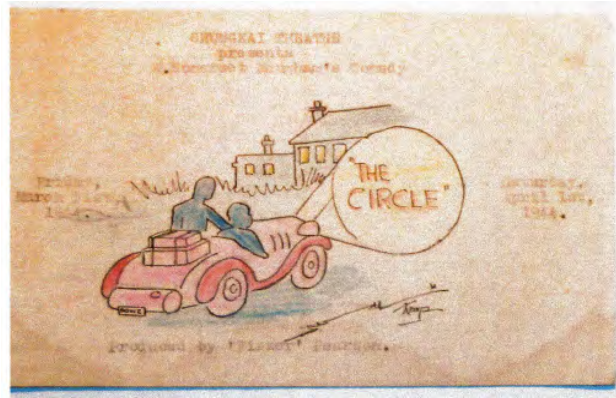


FIGURE 6.14. PROGRAM COVER FOR *THE CIRCLE*. COURTESY OF SALLY ORMAN.

The Circle is a comedy of manners about love and marriage among the British upper classes. Its humor is not only witty but subtle, dependent upon an audience understanding a subtext critical of British class and culture—and therefore all the more difficult for the Dutch/Indonesians to appreciate.

Lines spoken at the end of the play by Clive Champion-Cheney, the father who believes he has solved his son Arnold’s marriage problems by having him offer his wife her freedom (which he’s certain she won’t take once it’s available), must have startled the POWs with their ironic relevance:

C-C: What makes a prison? Why, bars and bolts. Remove them and a prisoner won’t want to escape.¹⁰¹

The other characters (as well as the audience) know that Arnold’s wife has just escaped with her lover, so they respond to Clive’s remark in “fits of laughter.”¹⁰² But the audience of POWs in a prison camp in Thailand that lacked “bars or bolts”—who would escape if they could—knew there were other “invisible” constraints that keep one imprisoned.

The reviews were very positive. Richardson and Gee thought it was “excellent indeed, and extremely well-acted.”¹⁰³ An enthusiastic response of another kind, according to Stephen Alexander, was “Fizzer” Pearson’s. Getting a little caught up in his intimate onstage relationship with Spong on opening night, he announced afterward, “I could have had Bobby last night, balls or no balls!”¹⁰⁴

^{xxv}Wilton, Mason, and Fisher constructed the single interior setting, Jack Chalker and Rob Brazil produced the décor, and H. Neville the “Wardrobe,” although “Special dresses” were credited to Bobby Spong.

Theatre Update

The theatrical producers' growing ambitions in the areas of settings and props demanded changes in the theatre committee and further renovation of the playhouse.

Three new people were added to the committee: A. Harold "Bill" Pycock, the camp quartermaster (who had a reputation for getting any supplies he needed from the Japanese¹⁰⁵), joined the committee as props manager (allowing Thwaites to devote all his time to publicity and box office), N.E.I. POW Te Tovey took on the responsibility for all décor (set design), and J. Olds joined Angier's wardrobe staff as his assistant.

All the set and costume designs (at least for British productions) would now be handled by staff designers and their crews rather than by the concert parties individually, as had been the case, which helped the committee gain some control over ever-expanding production concepts and expenditures.

The box office and the new seating policy went into effect in April. Lieutenant John Milford made note of it: "the theatre now has a Booking Office and gets a certain revenue from reserved 'seats' (Officers 10¢, O.R.s 5¢). We have no need for such features as a car park, a bar, or a cloak room (if any one had any clothes beyond the very exiguous minimum for decency, they certainly would not risk entrusting them to anyone else), but we have one novel feature, a Crutch Park, where the limbless men jettison their supports to avoid discommoding their neighbors while they enjoy the entertainment."¹⁰⁶

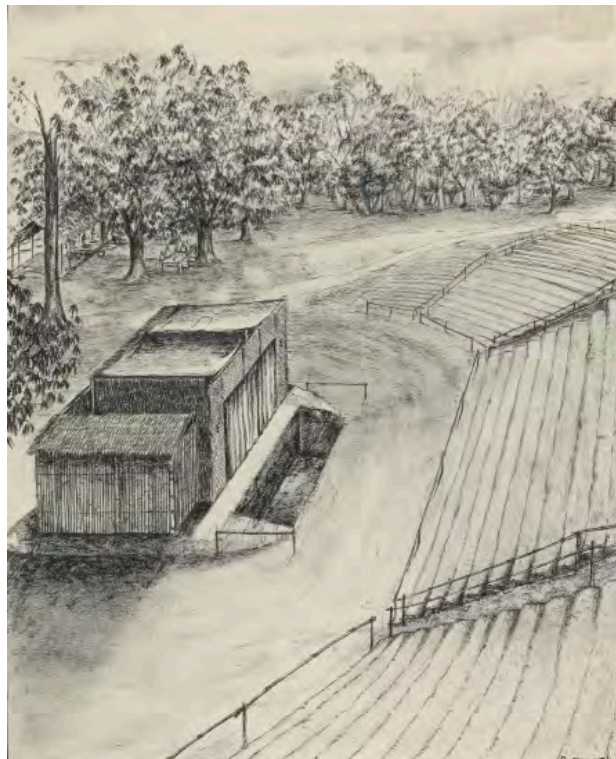


FIGURE 6.15. SKETCH OF THE CHUNGKAI THEATRE, APRIL 1944. PHILIP MENINSKY. IWM ART LD6529.

A sketch of the Chungkai theatre drawn in early April by Philip Meninsky shows the renovations that had been made in the stagehouse to accommodate the growing need for offstage space and onstage

scenic capabilities. A large canvas tarpaulin borrowed from the Japanese covers the roof not only in anticipation of rain but more importantly to make the stage dark enough for the latest staging innovation to be effective. (To learn more about this renovation, see Chapter 12: “Jolly Good Show!”)

Britt's Coups

Given the lackluster success of *Animal Crackers*, Leo Britt was intent that his next show, *Shooting Stars*—an original musical revue—would be a smash hit. Full-color posters plastered all over camp unashamedly proclaimed, “Written and produced by the Maestro himself” and that it “would be the hit of the season.”¹⁰⁷ On Britt’s insistence, a notice was posted outside the auditorium stating, “Show commences 8:30. Late-comers will be required to wait outside the Area until the end of the First Act.”¹⁰⁸

Britt wasn’t just imposing his professional standards on the audience. As the contest over which nationality could produce the best entertainment now involved production values, Britt wanted his new show to thrill audiences not only with sets and costumes but with his *coup de théâtre*: special lighting. This was the first time lighting had been employed since fall 1943. Someone—probably Bill Pycock—had done a good job convincing the Japanese that Chungkai was not, like Tamarkan, a strategic target. The late starting time was to ensure the lights’ maximum effectiveness.¹⁰⁹

Another coup was Britt’s engagement of Bobby Spong to play the female lead as “the seductive crooneuse.”¹¹⁰ To get his large cast of thirty performers in top form, Britt had put them through an intense three-week rehearsal schedule on the repertory model: those actors in *Animal Crackers* or *The Circle* had rehearsed *Shooting Stars* during the day and performed their other show in the evening.^{xxvi}

The plots of this book-revue had to do with the star performers and band being kidnapped by American gangsters and held aboard a yacht for ransom. At the climax, Britt, playing the arch-gangster, reveals himself as a super G-man, arrests the crooks, and marries the band’s “seductive crooneuse.”¹¹¹

Britt’s attention to production values as well as his performers paid off for most, if not quite all the audience members. John Sharp was duly impressed: “Theatre sets, props and dress get more elaborate.”¹¹² Gee thought the stage lighting was “used with great success,” though the “show itself was slow in getting underway but warmed up into a sparkling musical production.”¹¹³ Richardson disagreed: the show had “a good stage management and good entertainment. But a punk script.”¹¹⁴ But for Aylwin, *Shooting Stars* had been “without exception the best produced show I’ve seen since a prisoner of war. I found myself completely lost in the show and when it was over felt I’d been swept away from myself and my p.o.w. surroundings.”¹¹⁵

With Pearson’s production of *The Circle* and Britt’s production of *Shooting Stars*, the Dutch had to concede that the British were indeed very good. “They had amateurs as well as professional actors,” Philip Brugman noted, “and their pieces were of high caliber.”¹¹⁶

Eddie Edwins Takes Up the Cause

Word spread that Eddie Edwins had declared he was planning to produce a show that contained material so audacious it would top anything done by the other British troupes or the Dutch/Indonesians and win him the honor of being the top entertainer in camp. “After all,” Frank Samethini observed, “[the British] had started to entertain their fellow prisoners before anyone else had done, so a greater feat had to be presented.”¹¹⁷ With cockney cheekiness, Edwins believed he was up to the task.

^{xxvi} For more on Leo Britt as a producer-director, see Chapter 13: “Precious Personalities.”

But the Dutch/Indonesians were not threatened by Edwins or his shows: “skits, song and dance numbers in which he played the part of a stand-up comic—were of lower caliber,” said Brugman.¹¹⁸

Frank Samethini was once again in the audience when Edwins opened his latest variety show on 14 April:

The theatre ground is filled to capacity. The regular Nip spectators are on their reserved seats. The music begins, the curtain rises—and soon the new stunt is revealed to everybody except, hopefully, to the Japanese. Breaking the previously held rule never to include the enemy in the script, the compère delivers one smart ambiguous jest after another about the whole menageries of Hitler, Mussolini and, daringly indeed, even the Japanese general Tojo! . . . His quipping is cleverly performed. In order to appreciate the innuendo one should understand English better than the average Korean or Jap guard does. It is really good—but also not good enough. One among the Japs finally catches on or perhaps the roar after each sentence has made him suspicious. Who would know? Anyhow, this Jap jumps up and rapidly speaking to his mates runs forward shouting “Stoppo! Bugeiro [*sic*]! Stoppo!”

Together with his mates he lines all actors up on the stage and then, before our astonished eyes, they are subjected to a solid one minute belting! Immediately afterwards the producer is ordered to continue the show but no laughing will be permitted. A certain strain is detectable among the performers. The play has lost its soul. The Dutch are still one in front.¹¹⁹

Sharp and Richardson were in attendance as usual, and this time neither declared the show a success—but for different reasons. Sharp was concerned about the inappropriateness of the “unrehearsed gags in presence of Thai female spectators”—wives and daughters of Thai vendors who ran a canteen in the camp.¹²⁰ Richardson pronounced the show only “fair” and thought it had some “bad singers.”¹²¹ Neither reviewer felt it necessary to mention the embarrassing fiasco that had taken place during the opening moments. Edwins would never again attempt to best his rivals.

Joop’s Cabaret Roars Back

Since the Dutch/Indonesian entertainers knew they could not win the contest for preeminence in camp entertainment through verbal means, they would use non-verbal. Postma was certain the originality and theatrical brilliance of his troupe’s new production, with its imaginative costumes and sets and virtuosic routines, would deal a decisive blow to the British competition. *Circus Cavaljos*, which opened on 20 April, featured clowns, acrobats, mimes, performing penguins and pumas, and a spectacular dance number.¹²²



FIGURE 6.16. PROGRAM COVER FOR *CIRCUS CAVALJOS*. PETER VAN VELTHUYSEN. IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

Besides his poster, Peter van Velthuysen's playbill, illustrated with characters from the show, lists a typical mixture of variety acts, songs, and sketches, among them "The Doll Store," "The Mystery of the Lotus," "Poverty (a one act play)," and "Acrobats."¹²³

Unlike *Shooting Stars*, Postma's show started at 6:45 p.m., while it was still daylight.¹²⁴ John Milford opined, "lighting is proving too expensive to be used much."^{xxvii} If that were true, Postma had decided to allocate more of his production budget for costumes and sets and reserve his lighting effects for "The Mystery of the Lotus" dance number that would come after it had grown dark.¹²⁵

The ecstatic reviews reveal how well Postma and his troupe succeeded in knocking out the competition: Richardson gave the show high marks ("very good clowns and dancing precise and polished"¹²⁶); Aylwin thought the show "outshone the English shows in its decor, costumes and scenery which considering all were improvised, had to be seen to be believed,"¹²⁷ and Jack Chalker remembered the whole production as superb:

[*Circus Cavaljos* was] perhaps the most ingeniously designed and constructed of any of the Chungkai theatre performances. It was funny, moving and extremely decorative, showing some superb costumes and using a great deal of mime both with and without music, spoken, as far as I can remember, in Dutch but mimed so well that language was irrelevant. A stunning, hilarious and memorable production.^{xxviii128}

^{xxvii} If Milford is right, one has to wonder if the theatre committee, which established production budgets, wasn't trying to advantage the British producers by squeezing Postma here.

^{xxviii} Further notes on the costumes, the construction of the lotus, and the lighting for this show can be found in Chapter 12: "Jolly Good Show!"

Many POWs who saw the show remarked on the profound effect the “Lotus Dance” had on their subconscious. Since each POW remembered it slightly differently, what follows is a composite reconstruction of the dance from several eyewitnesses.

After the curtain fell on the previous act, the compère appeared at the side of the stage to announce the last item on the bill: “The Mystery of the Lotus.” The setting, “A Cave: The Temple of Ammon-Ra.” As the orchestra started to play—“[t]he music was obviously indigenous to the Dutch East Indies and Polynesian generally”—“the curtain went up.” The stage was in darkness, “and then in the glow of freshly lit lighting, a huge lotus blossom was seen” center stage. As the petals gradually unfolded, a “devastatingly beautiful Damsel” emerged and started to dance before the [statue of the] God in a “succession of graceful arabesques.” She was dressed in a green diaphanous outfit with a floating fabric panel (*selandang*) attached to the back of her halter top. Her hair was covered by a headdress which had a high peaked front painted with a pink lotus design. “The audience were silent,” “following with rapt attention, interpreting every movement each in his own way.” “The figure and classic grace of the dancer was most convincing.”



FIGURE 6.17. “THE MYSTERY OF THE LOTUS.” HUIB VAN LAAR COLLECTION. IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

As she continued to dance, a grotesque figure dressed in black enters the temple and watches her. His head is covered by a tight-fitting cap through

which devil's horns protrude—a Mephistophelean figure.

The “ravishing girl . . . then danced a most intricate routine with the devil for her partner” until at last, she re-entered the lotus. The “man fell prostrate in adoration while the Lotus flower slowly closed, enfolding the beautiful maiden within its petals.” As the “stage lighting slowly faded to darkness,” the “orchestra faded out,” and the curtain descended. After a moment of silence, the audience “highly applauded.”^{xxix129}

An audience caught up in rapt attention before responding is the highest form of appreciation any performance can receive. For many spectators, “The Mystery of the Lotus” was numinous—an archetypal event on which they projected their deepest longings.

Weary Dunlop believed the dance resurrected what he thought had been lost from being constantly in the presence of so much sickness and death: his sense of beauty with all its elusive qualities.¹³⁰ Ernest Gordon felt similarly: “‘Yes, life is good,’ he seemed to be saying with his body. ‘Look at the beauty all around us. See it in the flower of which I am a part, in the sunlight which opens petals and the breeze which moves me. I dance because I am a part of the beauty and because I am thankful for the mystery that is life.’”¹³¹

The music for the “Lotus Dance” had not been Indonesian in origin as thought but was one of Norman Smith’s original bolero compositions used with permission by Han Samethini, who led the pit orchestra. Scored for different instruments and with a less insistent rhythm, it sounded “indigenous.”¹³²

[To listen to an electronic realization of Norman Smith’s “Lotus Dance,” access **Audio Link 6.2.**]

Audio



6.2

With *Circus Cavaljos*, there was no doubt in anyone’s mind that Joop Postma and his Dutch/Indonesian performers had regained their position as “Ollanda Number One.”

Two Farcical Interludes

The scheduled dates for the next camp entertainment, 28 and 29 April, coincided with the annual celebration of the emperor’s birthday. But the Chungkai show was cancelled because the Japanese in Groups II and IV had been ordered to headquarters at Kanburi, where they would give performances in competition with other units in honor of the occasion. (Competition, it seems, had become contagious.) To gain the advantage, they had sets, props, and costumes made by the Chungkai theatre staff for their offerings.¹³³

Before the two groups departed for Kanburi, a dispute broke out between the officers in charge over which could use the services of the Chungkai orchestra for their unit’s performance—thus gaining a further advantage.¹³⁴ The dispute was resolved when headquarters at Kanburi stepped in and announced that the orchestra would not perform for either group but would provide music for the festivities generally.

^{xxix} Joqui Steenhuizen was “the Lotus Dancer,” Philip Brugman, the Devil. As a professional dancer before the war, Brugman considered this dance to be his specialty [Gee, *Diary*, 22 April 1944]. This is the last performance record we have noted from Steenhuizen.

Early the next morning, Smith and twenty musicians, one ballad singer, and “Fizzer” Pearson (in case a clown who could do slapstick humor was needed), guarded by a Japanese sergeant and corporal, boarded a Thai barge to take them across the river to Kanburi.¹³⁵

As a replacement for their lost entertainment, the POWs back in Chungkai improvised a burlesque soccer match between “Angela [Bobby] Spong and Her Boy Friends” and “Doc Dunlop and His Quacks.”¹³⁶



FIGURE 6.18. SOCCER MATCH ANNOUNCEMENT. HUIB VAN LAAR COLLECTION. IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

The giant red “V” in which “Angela” stands triumphant with her foot on the ball signifies “victory” of course—and not just in the soccer match.

Angela’s team played in costumes borrowed from the theatre—the Dutch dressed as clowns from their recent production of *Circus Cavaljos*—and musicians not in Smith’s orchestra played sprightly music on the sidelines.¹³⁷ It was during this wild farce of a soccer match that one of Spong’s players, dressed as a pregnant woman, went into labor and delivered a baby.^{xxx138}

But the farcical events were not over yet. As Norman Smith and company started back to Chungkai at the conclusion of the Kanburi festival, the I. J. A. corporal was too drunk to safely manage the steep bank down to the barge, and Smith was ordered by the sergeant to carry him. When he tried to pick up the corporal, the man started fighting. A big strapping fellow, Smith got the corporal in a fireman’s lift—and with that, the corporal’s mood suddenly changed. Thinking he was now in the arms of one of the geisha prostitutes attending the festival, he threw his arms around Smith’s neck and crooned in his ear.

Smith got the corporal down the bank and started to lower him to the barge, but the man fell backward into the water, which revived his fighting spirit. In desperation, Smith knocked him out, got

xxx There may be a camp in-joke here, as earlier John Sharp reported a wry statement made to him by one of the doctors: “Captain [H. Crozier Faulder]’s comment—we have done almost every type of operation except childbirth—and after what is going on in the camp now we’re expecting to do that soon” [John Sharp, 27 March 1944]. What occasioned this comment we don’t know, but better rations and light duty were, perhaps, beginning to produce unexpected results. An earlier diary entry may shed some light on this question: “Dutch navy-cake costs \$50—I’m told” [John Sharp, Diary, 27 March 1944]. Navy-cake is homosexual slang for anal intercourse. Sharp makes no further comment about it, but the two references suggest that some sort of underground homosexual activity may have been occurring in Chungkai, strictly against military regulations.

him in the boat, and along with another POW sat on him while they made the trip back to Chungkai.¹³⁹ When they arrived at the camp, Smith carried the corporal (still passed out) to his hut, dumped him on his bed, and quickly left, hoping the corporal would not remember what had happened. Instead of the feared reprisal, the next day Smith received a letter from the corporal written in English apologizing for his bad behavior and enclosing ten Thai dollars “for the benefit of the members of the orchestra.”¹⁴⁰

Theatre Update

In early May, important changes took place in theatre committee personnel and in the structure of the stagehouse.

On 1 May a crisis that had been brewing in the management of the Chungkai theatre finally came to a head. Committee chairman Lieutenant-Colonel Mapey resigned and was eventually replaced by Major Harold “Bill” Pycock—but not without a kerfuffle that bruised egos. In the leadership vacuum, Leo Britt had tried to engineer a restructuring “because the present committee was too youthful and inexperienced, and a small core of ‘business men’ would obviously be better.”¹⁴¹

After the smoke cleared, John Coast mused, “I think Leo was disappointed not to have got a smaller committee, but he contented himself by trying to control the ten of us.”¹⁴² Leofric Thorpe, who knew both Britt and the inner workings of the theatre committee well, wrote,

All you read about [the] Theatre Committee I am sure can be disregarded. It is [was] always a cross one had to bear. There were only two people at that time who had any influence at all, Leo [Britt] and Harold Pycock, who was Camp Quartermaster. Leo said what he was going to do, and Pycock did all he could to see it was possible. Anything else was no more than camp politics and had to be put up with.¹⁴³

Bill Pycock would chair the committee until early 1945.



FIGURE 6.19. THE CHUNGKAI THEATRE, MAY 1944. WATERCOLOR BY JACK CHALKER. COURTESY OF JACK CHALKER.

Jack Chalker's watercolor shows the latest renovations and improvements made to the Chungkai theatre since April to increase its flexibility and technical capabilities—the most important of which were the replacement of the flat canvas roof with a thatched atap pitched roof that would shed the rain, and side wings which pivoted on a central axis for quick scene changes.^{xxxi} (For more details on these changes, see Chapter 12: “Jolly Good Show!”)

The British Response: *Our Stately Homes*

The British answer to the extraordinary theatricality of Postma's *Circus Cavaljos* was a production of *Three One-Act Plays*^{xxxi} that took advantage of the latest playhouse renovations to present three different realistic interiors. Jack Chalker and Rob Brazil were credited with the décor.¹⁴⁴ In another first for Chungkai, each one-act had a different producer-director (“Fizzer” Pearson, Nigel Wright, and Gus Harffey)—but all the one-acts were performed by ‘Fizzer’s’ little company of 10 men.^{xxxi}¹⁴⁵

Of the three plays, A. A. Milne's *The Boy Comes Home* must have garnered the most interest since it concerned a soldier who has just returned home from the First World War. Philip, a young officer, has come back a changed man accustomed to making his own decisions and giving orders, which puts him in conflict with Uncle James, a wealthy businessman who still considers himself Philip's guardian and has plans for Philip's future in his company. Though Milne questions the mores of British society in his play, he ultimately reaffirms them when Philip, free to determine his own destiny, chooses to join Uncle James' company.

“It was these three plays,” Coast claimed, “that showed that a remarkably high standard of acting

^{xxxi} Even though Chalker's watercolor is dated 1943, there was no such theatre in Chungkai at that time. In an e-mail to the author, Chalker admitted that he had misdated this and other sketches when he was in Bangkok after the war and had time to review and complete his enormous collection of drawings and watercolors [Chalker, E-mail, 11 November 2004].

^{xxxi} Stanley Houghton's *The Dear Departed* (1910), A. A. Milne's *The Boy Comes Home* (1918), Sir Arthur Wing Pinero's *The Playgoers: A Domestic Episode* (1913).

^{xxxi} Besides Pearson, the Players' company consisted of Eric Griffiths-Jones, Gus Harffey, Douglas Morris, Terry Morris, Roy Randolph, Bobby Spong, Freddie Thompson, “Nellie” Wallace, and Nigel Wright, with Eddie Edwins, Bertie Perkins, and Te Tovey cast in walk-on roles.

had already been attained.”¹⁴⁶

The emphasis on production values had also paid off: Richardson thought the décor, acting, and production good but the plays “thin.”¹⁴⁷ John Sharp partly disagreed. He thought the plays “very good” and the stage effects “extraordinary” but was shocked to learn that five [Thai] dollars had been spent on the “dye for the dresses.”¹⁴⁸ With the large amount of money lavished on sets, costumes, and props in evidence, Aylwin observed what had become obvious to everyone: “The theatre has developed into a big business in this camp.”¹⁴⁹

Camp Update: Three Events

In May, three events took place that would affect the present and the future of entertainment in Chungkai.

The first involved the pace of evacuations of Group IV POWs to their base camp at Tamuang and the heavy sick to Nakhon Pathom that was now stepped up to 500 a day. With little or no concert party operating in either of these camps, “Fizzer” Pearson and other members of his troupe, including Eric Griffiths-Jones and Nigel Wright, were ordered to Nakhon Pathom via Tamuang. But Bobby Spong, who had been Pearson’s “leading lady” for many shows, did not go with them.¹⁵⁰ And ten days before the end of the month, Weary Dunlop along with some key members of his staff, one of whom would be head masseuse Jack Chalker, left Chungkai for Nakhon Pathom as well.¹⁵¹

The second event was an announcement made in Chungkai on 12 May: “a Jap Officer in Kamburi [Kanburi] camp, impressed by a visit the Chungkai Band had paid [on 29 April] . . . decided that he would set up the Hollywood of Thailand and got permission to draw in entertainers from each group, in order to form a centralized concert party, that would travel the rounds of each camp.”¹⁵² The “borehole rumour” Richard Sharp heard said that the commandant at Kanburi was reputedly going to “provide \$2000 for instruments (including \$1000 from Thai canteen)” in support of this idea. If true, the offer would be very tempting, but “Chungkai viewed this with suspicion.”¹⁵³

The final event had to do with the monsoon rains that were beginning to fall quite steadily. In mid-May, Richardson logged some disquieting entries in his diary: “considerable rain at Chungkai (first rains). River rising so rain up-country also.” Four days later, “River now almost too deep to cross.”¹⁵⁴

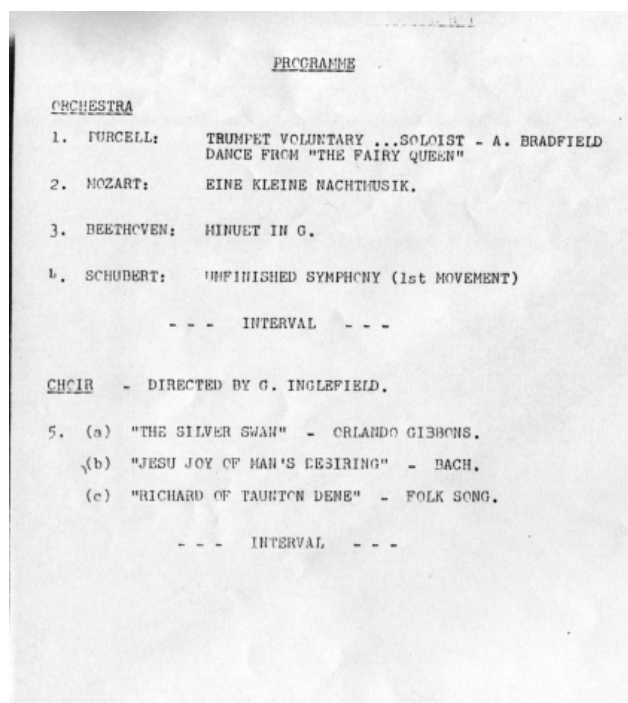
Promenade Concert

On the same night as the Kanburi announcement, the latest in the remarkable series of performances to occur on stage at Chungkai took place: a *Promenade Concert* consisting entirely of classical music performed by the Chungkai orchestra under the sole direction of Eric Cliffe, with soloist James F. Clarke and Gibby Inglefield’s choir. Though orchestral concerts did not count in the high-stakes contest between the British and Dutch/Indonesian theatrical producers, designers and technicians had taken the opportunity to provide the show with a stunning black and white Art Deco setting and to introduce innovative lighting.^{xxxiv}

To prepare for this concert, Cliffe had rehearsed his musicians intensely for a fortnight.¹⁵⁵ Paper for the scores had been supplied by their music-loving commandant Kokubo, and a number of copyists (one of whom was Stanley Gimson) had worked laboriously transcribing music from scratchy gramophone records and musicians who remembered the scores.¹⁵⁶ When three of Cliffe’s musicians—a drummer,

^{xxxiv} See Chapter 12: “Jolly Good Show!” for more information on the staging.

guitarist [Jimmy van Lingen], and violinist—were sent downriver to Tamuang in the days immediately preceding the performance, their loss almost sabotaged the concert.¹⁵⁷ But Cliffe made the necessary adjustments and soldiered on.



FIGURES 6.20. *PROMENADE CONCERT*. FIRST PAGE OF THE PROGRAM. COURTESY OF MRS. ARTHUR JOHNSTON.

The range and technical skill demanded of the British and Dutch/Indonesian musicians by the program of music was extraordinary (see **Figure 6.21** in the Image Gallery for a listing of the musicians^{xxxv}). One of the most meaningful selections was the “Largo” from Dvorak’s *New World Symphony*, based on the American Negro spiritual “Goin’ Home.”

Eric Cliffe was pleased with the concert’s outcome: “The interest shown in good music by all ranks increased with each concert given (one audience numbering over three thousand), and many who, before the war, had been unsympathetic towards any music other than ‘Swing’ were heard . . . whistling Bach and Purcell as they carried out their camp duties.”¹⁵⁸ The symphony concert immediately generated “a demand for further Proms,” but Chungkai would have only this one to remember. Shortly afterward, Cliffe and several members of his orchestra were sent to Tamuang.¹⁵⁹

Knowing that a full concert of classical music would not appeal to everyone’s taste, the following night the orchestra played a *Swing Concert* of popular music led by Gus Harffey, who had stepped in as conductor because Norman Smith as a “charter member of the Amoebic Dysentery Club” and lyricist “Biggles” Bywaters had been placed on the same draft for Tamuang as Cliffe.^{xxxvi}

^{xxxv} The program, prepared before the three musicians were sent away, lists nineteen musicians along with their instruments and additional singers.

^{xxxvi} See more about the further musical activities of these three men in later chapters: Smith at Nakhon Pathom in Chapter 8 to “Breakout!”; Smith, Cliffe, and Bywaters in Kanburi in Chapter 9: “The Battle for Concerts.”

Leo Britt's Triumph

In the weeks prior to the *Promenade Concert*, Smith had been busily engaged in rehearsing the pit orchestra and singers for Britt's big new musical, *Wonder Bar*, set to open the following weekend. He was able to conduct the first run-through with music before turning the orchestra over to Ernest Lenthall, bandmaster of the Cambridgeshires Regimental Band (who had conducted an orchestral concert at Takanun earlier).

Advertised as "Thailand's Greatest Musical Comedy," the final rehearsals of *Wonder Bar* attracted more than the usual number of POWs to sit in the amphitheatre to watch—a practice that had become a prized custom.¹⁶⁰ But on 17 May, as a dress rehearsal was in progress on stage, Leo Britt complained to the I. J. A. authorities about the "do-nothings" who had gathered in the auditorium to watch. He had gained so much clout with the Japanese by this point that they threatened to punish anyone found there.¹⁶¹

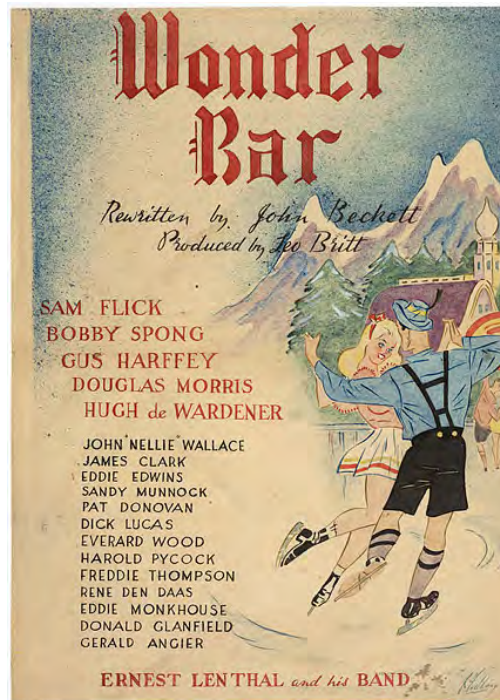


FIGURE 6.22. WONDER BAR POSTER. LESLIE FIELDING. IWM
O17073_1. COURTESY OF HUGH DE WARDENER

With Pearson's departure, all hopes for the British winning the contest against the Dutch/Indonesians now lay with Leo Britt. *Wonder Bar*, his most elaborate production to date, opened at 8:45 p.m. on 19 May and ran for two triumphant performances. Britt had been in the musical in 1929 when it was produced in London by André Charlot.

For the Chungkai production, the original plot was rewritten by John Beckett to fit a more condensed time frame mandated by curfew restrictions and limitations on the number of settings that could be employed.¹⁶² The unusually late starting time signaled that special lighting effects would be used from the opening moment.

The three-act musical comedy was performed by a cast of thirty actors, singers, and dancers that

included three Dutch/Indonesians. Of this group, nine were female impersonators (see **Figure 6.23** in the Image Gallery for the cast list). In the orchestra pit were eleven musicians, led by Ernest Lenthall. Of the nine or more musical numbers, several were new pieces, such as the “Alpine (Pizzicato) Polka,” were written by Smith and Bywaters. As a dancer-singer in the original production, Britt had choreographed the show as well.

Te Tovey designed two completely different settings for the show: Act One took place in “Sir Charles’ Bedroom Suite at the Grand Hotel, St. Moritz.”

“Can you possibly imagine,” wrote Ian Mackintosh of the first act, “three men impersonating girls ho[l]ding the stage for near three quarters of an hour with small talk, and one of them reclining in bed! And to the end of the act they got up sang a very catchy song and finished with a high-stepping dance. I can’t remember when I have laughed so heartily.”¹⁶³

John Coast believed the trio’s song and dance was the high point of Act One:

This latter number was sung in French, German and English by three young things who ended in a dance routine of high-kicking that delighted the audience; and seeing those three “girls” capering about on the stage, it was odd to think that in normal times one was an R.A.S.C. Private, from London [Bobby Spong]; one a Regular Officer [Douglas Morris]; and the other a bald-headed Corporal in a Highland Regiment, Johnny [John “Nellie” Wallace], who had come through cholera, malaria, dysentery, beriberi and jaundice altogether up country!¹⁶⁴

Acts Two and Three took place in the hotel’s “Wonder Bar’ Cabaret.”^{xxxvii 165} The highlights of Act Two were “a low comedy scene between a waiter, [Everard] Woods, and a charwoman, Freddie Thompson,” and a Spanish tango with accordion accompaniment danced by “Cecile” [Pat Donovan] and her partner André [René Den Daas].¹⁶⁶

But it was the Act Three cabaret scene that dazzled everyone with its brilliance. “Dresses, sets, costumes, dancing and singing made us gasp with astonishment when the curtains opened on the tiny stage, like a puppet-theatre in the darkness,” wrote John Durnford from his vantage point at the top of the amphitheatre.¹⁶⁷ Milner was also stunned by the act’s opening moment: “the stage was full of colour, with many couples dancing a fox-trot.”¹⁶⁸

John Sharp, who had secured a reserved seat for the opening, called *Wonder Bar* “a triumph for the producer: very good sets, sustained interest, good costume and remarkable production.”¹⁶⁹ Aylwin agreed: “a most ambitious production, magnificently carried out. When the curtain went up on the final scene with full chorus, I felt I was in a London Theatre. The dresses and décor were amazingly well improvised.”¹⁷⁰ Geoffrey Gee went further, declaring *Wonder Bar* “A real theatrical thrill!”¹⁷¹ But it was G. E. Chippington who summed up the show’s total effect: “unbelievable. A magic carpet to transport us across time and space to another life where people actually live in a civilized society.”¹⁷²

During the curtain calls, Leo Britt was “called to the front of the stage to make a speech.”¹⁷³

^{xxxvii} See more details about these settings in Chapter 12: “Jolly Good Show!”

Two Production Stills

Two black and white photographs of *Wonder Bar* survive. They were taken by a Japanese photographer to prevent an onsite inspection by the Red Cross, which had been pressing the I. J. A. to get a look at one of their hospital camps and so far had been prevented from doing so. What could be more convincing of the prisoners' welfare than photographs documenting the "happy" POWs enjoying themselves? The prints exhibit the difficulty of taking good black and white photographs in bright tropical sunlight, which heightens the contrast, flaring highlights and deepening shadows.



FIGURE 6.24. *Wonder Bar* CURTAIN CALL. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF MARTIN PERCIVAL.

The first *Wonder Bar* photograph shows twenty-seven members of the cast and crew on stage in a curtain call arrangement. Eight members of the orchestra are seated on stools in the pit. Three other musicians (the bass player, the drummer, and the conductor) are not included in the frame. Seated along the front edge of the stage are beaming Japanese camp authorities and Korean guards.



FIGURE 6.25. *Wonder Bar*, Act III. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF MARTIN PERCIVAL.

The second *Wonder Bar* photograph shows a scene from Act III with only a select number of cast members on stage. It is just possible to make out Huib van Laar's Chungkai theatre logo on the proscenium walls far right and left.

[For a detailed examination of these photographs and an explanation of how Britt staged what is seen in the photographs to undercut their propaganda value, watch **Video Link 6.1.**]

Video



6.1

The First and Best

“The highest peak reached in what one might call the first and best period of Chungkai entertainment was Leo’s ‘Wonder Bar’ adaptation,” wrote John Coast, “to my mind the best all-round show ever put on.”¹⁷⁴ Since everyone in Chungkai agreed, the contest between the British and Dutch/Indonesians over who could produce the best entertainment was finally resolved. For Britt it was a personal triumph as well. As if to certify his status as “number one” producer-director, he was “officially recognized by the Japs . . . and excused other more menial work in order to train and produce our shows.”¹⁷⁵

After *Wonder Bar*, the intense rivalry between the British and the Dutch/Indonesian entertainers faded into the background and everyone got on with the hard work of producing a new show every four weeks. There would still be competition, of course—that would be true among any group of theatre artists sharing the same performance space and trying to appeal to the same audiences. But now it would be what Philip Brugman called a “healthy competition.”¹⁷⁶ The “unhealthy” competition had produced amazing results in raising standards of performance and production values and in technical innovations. A “healthy” competition would challenge them all to build upon those accomplishments.

Endnotes

- 1 Owtram, 109.
- 2 Milford, Diary, 6 February 1944.
- 3 Mackintosh, Diary, 9 March 1944.
- 4 Milford, Diary, 6 February 1944.
- 5 Mackintosh, Diary, 9 March 1944.
- 6 Aylwin, Memoir, 12–13.
- 7 Gimson, Diary, 18 February 1944.
- 8 Chalker, Letter, 3 March 2000.
- 9 Coast, 109.
- 10 Anonymous, 102.
- 11 Cosford, 72, 104.
- 12 Donald Smith, 101–102.
- 13 Chalker, *BRA*, 75.
- 14 IWM Misc. 90 Item 1323.
- 15 Richardson, Diary, 29 May 1943.
- 16 Chalker, Diary, 8 August 1943.
- 17 Chalker, Diary, 8 August 1943.
- 18 Gimson, Diary, 15 August 1943.
- 19 Chalker, Letter, 7 October 2005.
- 20 Riley, 100.
- 21 Chalker, Diary, 16 October 1943. Chalker mentions that dates in his diary are sometimes slightly off.
- 22 Frank Samethini, 91.
- 23 Richard Sharp, 51.
- 24 Johnston, Diary, 5 February 1944.
- 25 Chalker, Diary, 12 November 1943.
- 26 Durnford, 150.
- 27 Anckorn, Interview, 41–42.
- 28 Durnford, 150; Chalker, Diary, 12 November 1943.
- 29 Chalker, Diary, 1 December 1943.
- 30 Chalker, Diary, 27 November 1943.
- 31 Chalker, Letter, 24 July 2000.
- 32 Chalker, Letter, 24 July 2000.
- 33 Chalker, Interview, 24.
- 34 Interview with Postma, in Leffelaar and van Witsen, 240; trans. by Sheri Tromp.
- 35 Interview with Postma, in Leffelaar and van Witsen, 240; trans. by Sheri Tromp.
- 36 John Sharp, Diary, 5 December 1943.
- 37 Interview with Postma, in Leffelaar and van Witsen, 240; trans. by Sheri Tromp.
- 38 Aylwin, Memoir, 125.
- 39 Interview with Brugman, in Leffelaar and van Witsen, 252; trans. by Sheri Tromp.
- 40 John Sharp, Diary, 3 July 1944.
- 41 Chalker, Diary, 25 December 1943.
- 42 Gordon, 184.
- 43 Cosford, 111.
- 44 Richardson, Memoir, 158.
- 45 Owtram, 109.
- 46 Johnston, Diary, 11 February 1944.
- 47 Coast, 183.
- 48 Frank Samethini, 89.
- 49 Frank Samethini, 90.

- 50 Frank Samethini, 90–91.
- 51 Dunlop, Diary, 17 January 1944.
- 52 Frank Samethini, 86.
- 53 Coast, 169–171; J. Sharp, Diary, 3, 6 March 1944.
- 54 Frank Samethini, <http://theskylookeddown.blogspot.com/2009/01/12-chungkai.html>, 9.
- 55 Coast, 170.
- 56 Richardson, Diary, 30 January 1944.
- 57 Richard Sharp, 51.
- 58 Cliffe, “Orchestras,” 5.
- 59 Richard Sharp, IWM, 51.
- 60 Terry Morris, Letter, 11 October 2000.
- 61 Coast, 171.
- 62 Gee, Diary, 29 July 1944.
- 63 Owtram, 109.
- 64 Richard Sharp, 50.
- 65 Cliffe, “Orchestras,” 5.
- 66 Richardson, Diary, 11 February 1944.
- 67 Johnston, Diary, 11 February 1944.
- 68 Johnston, Diary, 11 February 1944.
- 69 Interview with Postma, in Leffelaar and van Witsen, 240, 249; trans. by Sheri Tromp.
- 70 Richardson, Memoir, 159.
- 71 Interview with Postma, in Leffelaar and van Witsen, 249; trans. by Sheri Tromp.
- 72 Interview with Brugman, in Leffelaar and van Witsen, 252–253; trans. by Sheri Tromp.
- 73 Interview with Postma, in Leffelaar and van Witsen, 249; trans. by Sheri Tromp.
- 74 Gimson, Diary, 18 February 1944.
- 75 Richardson, Memoir, 161.
- 76 Gee, Diary, 12 February 1944.
- 77 Dunlop, Diary, 18 February 1944; Aylwin, 13.
- 78 Aylwin, 13.
- 79 Richardson, Diary, 19 February 1944.
- 80 Dunlop, 12 April 1944.
- 81 Carter, 177.
- 82 Coast, 175.
- 83 Richard Sharp, 49–50.
- 84 Richard Sharp, 49–50.
- 85 Interview with Brugman, in Leffelaar and van Witsen, 253; trans. by Sheri Tromp.
- 86 Frank Samethini, 101.
- 87 Gee, Diary, 18 March 1944.
- 88 John Sharp, Diary, 19 March 1944.
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- 90 Frank Samethini, 101–102.
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- 96 Richardson, Diary, 25 March 1944.
- 97 Gee, Diary, 25 March 1944.
- 98 Gee, Diary, 5 February 1944.
- 99 Gee, Diary, 15 March 1944.
- 100 Gee, Diary, 25 March 1944.

- 101 Maugham, *The Circle*, in Gassner, 692.
- 102 Maugham, *The Circle*, in Gassner, 692.
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- 104 Alexander, 185.
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- 114 Richardson, Diary, 10 April 1944.
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- 116 Interview with Brugman, in Leffelaar and van Witsen, 153; trans. by Sheri Tromp.
- 117 Frank Samethini, 102–103.
- 118 Interview with Brugman, in Leffelaar and van Witsen, 153; trans. by Sheri Tromp.
- 119 Frank Samethini, 102–103.
- 120 John Sharp, Diary, 16 April 1944.
- 121 Richardson, Diary, 15 April 1944.
- 122 Coast, 180.
- 123 *Getekend*, 157; trans. by Sheri Tromp.
- 124 Gee, Diary, 22 April 1944.
- 125 Milford, Diary, 23 April 1944.
- 126 Richardson, Diary, 22 April 1944.
- 127 Aylwin, Folder 7, 27.
- 128 Chalker, Letter, 3 March 2000.
- 129 Laurie Allison, Letter, 24 August 2001; Weary Dunlop, Diary, 21 April 1944; Ernest Gordon, 166–167; Owtram, 108–109; Terry Morris, Self-Interview #1, 5; Interview with Postma, in Leffelaar and van Witsen, 249; trans. by Sheri Tromp; Norman Smith, 58; Museon #101206s.
- 130 Dunlop, Diary, 21 April 1944.
- 131 Gordon, 167.
- 132 Norman Smith, 58; Interview with Postma, in Leffelaar and van Witsen, 249; trans. by Sheri Tromp.
- 133 Dunlop, Diary, 29 April 1944.
- 134 John Sharp, Diary, 29 April 1944.
- 135 Norman Smith, 42.
- 136 Museon, Inventarisnummer: 101206 a1.
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- 139 Norman Smith, 43–44.
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- 141 Coast, 178–179 passim.
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- 146 Coast, 176.
- 147 Richardson, Diary, 6 May 1944.
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- 150 Coast, 183.
151 Dunlop, Diary, 22 May 1944.
152 Richard Sharp, 53.
153 Richard Sharp, 53.
154 Richardson Diary, 14, 18 May 1944.
155 Coast, 183.
156 Cliffe, "Orchestras," 5.
157 Richardson, Diary, 12 May 1944.
158 Cliffe, "Orchestras," 5.
159 Coast, 183.
160 Durnford, 146.
161 John Sharp, Diary, 17 May 1944.
162 Durnford, 148.
163 Mackintosh, Diary, 23 May 1944.
164 Coast, 180.
165 Johnston, Diary, n.d., 113.
166 Coast, 180; Durnford, 148.
167 Durnford, 147–148.
168 Milner, Diary, 21 May 1944.
169 John Sharp, Diary, 19 May 1944.
170 Aylwin, Folder 7, 54–55.
171 Gee, Diary, 19 May 1944.
172 Chippington, 401.
173 Coast, 180.
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175 Owtram, 104.
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Chapter 6: “Chungkai Showcase”

Part Two: Mid-May 1944 to July 1945

2. “Rain Must Fall”

Behind the Scenes

If there was any expectation that the entertainment world at Chungkai would be relatively normal now that the competition between the British and Dutch/Indonesians had been settled, that thought was about to change. All the smiling faces looking out from the stage in the *Wonder Bar* photographs belie the fact that behind the scenes all was not well: there had been a falling out between Gus Harffey and Leo Britt. “After Norman [Smith] had gone, Gus took over the band,” wrote Richard Sharp, “but fancying to himself the diabolic machinations of Britt, (who might quite possibly have been pleased to see him go) in a plot of dark and Italian intrigue, [he] resigned.”¹ Britt’s specific “machinations” are unknown, but Harffey had wanted to be named musical director, with responsibilities for leading the Chungkai orchestra as well as the swing band. Ernest Lenthall was named to the orchestra post instead, and, after Harffey resigned, violinist Ken “Tug” Wilson became leader of the band. Harffey would get his wish later in Kanburi.

But this disruption was minor compared to what happened next when the most hilarious as well as the most controversial show in Chungkai was produced.

The *Thai Diddle Diddle* Debacle

Thai Diddle Diddle was a revue by a new producer, battalion medical officer Dudley Gotla. When Gotla first proposed the subject matter of his revue, members of the theater committee voiced concerns about its contents. They warned Gotla that a show based on topical humor was “stale and wouldn’t go down” well with the troops, but he stubbornly insisted that it would, and the committee reluctantly gave in.²



FIGURE 6.26. POSTER FOR
THAI DIDDLE DIDDLE.
GEOFFREY GEE, COURTESY
OF HUGH DE WARDENER.

Gotla commissioned Geoffrey Gee (“a ‘grateful patient’”³) to create posters for his revue, apparently Gee’s first theatre assignment. The poster aboveⁱ lists an international all-star cast of twenty-six actors and musicians, many of them Chungkai regulars. Other names are new, a mixture of British and Dutch performers. Three stand out: Van Hamm, a Dutch/Indonesian performer; Fraser “Hank” Martens, an American naval officer—the only American in the camp⁴—in his first Chungkai appearance; and Ah Hoo, who, it turns out, was not a Chinese performer but Dudley Gotla “dressed up as a Chinaman for his Front Cloth Act.”ⁱⁱ Another version of the poster must have had an image of a cow jumping over the moon, referring, of course, to the well-known nursery rhyme from which the show took its name, as that image will be used as evidence of subterfuge by the Japanese in an internal investigation. To forestall any questions about its dubious humor, a subtitle, *No Offence Meant*, had been appended to the main title on the posters. But that gesture didn’t prevent offense from being taken.

Thai Diddle Diddle consisted of a series of satirical songs and sketches. Its opening on 27 May proved to be a showstopper—literally—causing such furor that further performances—as well as all future productions—were temporarily suspended until there could be a full investigation of why this show had been allowed to go on.

There were, in fact, two investigations: one by the Japanese administration, the other by the POW administration. Exactly what caused the hue and cry is a matter of some disagreement among the POWs who traded borehole rumors about the show. As far as they could tell, the investigations focused on three areas: language, representation, and actions.

The Japanese Investigation

Language. “The Nips asked for a copy of the script,” John Sharp reported, “and have threatened to punish any insults.”⁶ Coast was puzzled: “Quite why they should have disliked us using such words as ‘Kurrah! Buggairo!’ or ‘Benjo speedo!’ which were part of our vocabulary and theirs was never explained.”ⁱⁱⁱ But the use of these commands and phrases had infuriated the Japanese, who thought they were being mocked.

During a long comic sketch about three POWs (wearing “Jap-Happies”) on a train trip across the United States delivering parcels, the POWs had sung their version of the Scottish song “You Take the High Road” and ended the chorus with “On the muddy, bloody banks of Kamburi!”⁸ The topical references alerted the Japanese to further possible insults.

Representation. Others thought the main offense must have been that the monkeys accompanying the POWs on the train trip (also wearing “Jap-Happies”) had been recognized as a not-so-subtle reference to their captors. As noted previously, this racist caricature was well known to the Japanese, and they would have been incensed about its presentation on stage.

Actions. Even more damning, Richardson and Durnford believed, were the characters’ actions in the scene. “Jap depredations of the few Red Cross supplies received were persistent,” wrote Richardson, “everyone knew about it.”⁹ So when the sketch depicted monkeys opening parcels and removing items for their own use before passing them on to the next camp, where the same action was repeated, ending with “the arrival of the ‘parcels’ at their destination where the staff tore them open to discover them perfectly empty,” a truth was revealed that everyone in the camp knew but that had never been publicly

ⁱ Only a black and white photocopy of the original is available. The original in Gotla’s possession “now hangs on the wall in [his] house (outside the toilet)” [Gotla, Letter, 8 July 2001].

ⁱⁱ A “front cloth act” is a stand-up comedy monologue that takes place on the apron before the front curtain.

ⁱⁱⁱ Japanese for “Attention!”; Japanese-English pidgin for “Bugger” and “Must go to the toilet now!” or, less politely in Fergus Anckorn’s translation, “Shit fast!”

acknowledged.¹⁰ And this, reported Durnford, is when, “the stage was rushed by an armed ‘posse’ of the camp-guards, and the show brought to a hurried conclusion.”¹¹

The British Investigation

But this wasn’t the whole story. Another account was reported by John Sharp: “Concert on Friday night—mediocre and much criticized—objected to by Nips for references to them and also by various camp authorities for filth.”¹² Sharp’s “various camp authorities” were senior officers among the POWs. But what “filth” was he referring to? Were objections raised to language used in the dialogue or lyrics?

Language. Norman Smith and “Biggles” Bywaters had composed several songs for this show before they were sent down to Tamuang. “Fore” portrayed a pair of lesbian golfers, one of whom nearly emasculates a male golfer with her golf swing, and in “Please Mister Flynn,” a star-struck young woman finds herself in bed with the movie star Errol Flynn, attempting to discourage his advances:

*So please Mister Flynn, you must take it on the chin,
I’m of the Old Brigade, not of the Light.
You may be an equestrian,
But I’m a mere pedestrian,
And Destiny isn’t riding here tonight.
So please Mr. Flynn, can’t you see the ice is thin,
You’ve skated near a fissure once or twice.
Don’t think my churlish attitude
Is based on sheer ingratitude,
So please Mister Flynn, on my knees Mister Flynn,
I don’t want to, not at any price.^{iv13}*

Lyrics replete with sexual innuendo and double entendre have a long tradition in the British theatre; perhaps the song’s humorous treatment of an innocent woman being seduced pushed the bounds of propriety too far for “various camp authorities.”

Representation. Coast believed the most troublesome turn for the POW authorities had to do with another of the comic sketches: a reprise of “The Warrior’s Return,” an old military concert party sketch that had been around since the First World War. In Gotla’s version, the soldier is a former POW home from Thailand after the war. Having been in an isolated camp for years, he “was quite unacclimatized to anything civilized, and spoke in the well-known pidgin-Japanese”:

When he wanted to “wash his hands” he plucked some leaves from the aspidistra, stuffed them in his pocket and left the room; when he asked for a banana he used the Malay word “pisang,” and when his wife reluctantly passed

^{iv} Find the lyrics to both these Bywaters songs in “The FEPOW Songbook.”

him the fruit bowl, minus the fruit, the misunderstanding had to be explained.¹⁴

Because of the scarcity of paper, the POWs had been forced to resort to primitive measures to take care of their basic needs. Hugh de Wardener, a performer in this sketch, considered this the funniest moment in the whole revue: “And the laughter went on and on. It was fascinating. They just went on and on and on. Because it related to them, you see.”¹⁵ But no one took offense at this part. The trouble came a few moments later.

Actions. In conversation with his wife, the former POW learns that an American soldier had been billeted in the house during the war.

And then there’s a noise of a baby—that was me [de Wardener]. And [the returning POW] wonders what the noise is . . . and of course, it’s a baby; not his! And so on . . . but it WAS funny.¹⁶ And they never stopped laughing . . . that did interest me. THAT THEY SHOULD LAUGH AT WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN TO THEM!¹⁷

So here we have it: the real offense was the presentation of a humorous sketch in which a soldier’s wife had been unfaithful while he was imprisoned in Thailand. The steadfastness of wives and sweethearts was a concern that weighed heavily on the minds of all the married or engaged POWs. American soldiers—stereotyped as oversexed—billeted in private homes back in Britain in preparation for the invasion of Europe gave rise to all sorts of anxieties.

One or more of the senior officers must have been greatly offended that Gotla had the audacity to suggest that their women back home might be unfaithful to them while they were prisoners of war. In the early days of captivity in Singapore, “The Warrior’s Return” had been presented by the Optimists concert party in the 18th Division’s area without complaint; now the subject was considered by some as too demoralizing. Whoever these “various camp authorities” were, Owtram was pressured to conduct an investigation.

Procedures

The Japanese wanted to reexamine the script to see why their censor had approved it. Coast thought the censor “must have slept though [it] when he read the script.”¹⁸ Gotla was interrogated by the Japanese and got “bashed up for one sketch . . . [and] because he could not give the Japanese a satisfactory answer to what the cow jumping over the moon on the poster meant, or [the title] Thai-Diddle-Diddle.”¹⁹ Medical officer Robert Hardie thought the Japanese had probably “looked up the word ‘diddle’ in a dictionary and finding that it meant ‘deceive’ or ‘cheat’ suspected some subtle criticism of the [Japanese East Asia] Co-Prosperity Sphere.”²⁰

At the same time, the POW administration grilled the theatre committee members about how they

v The Japanese could have seen this phrase as an allusion to Allied soldiers, who they believed (rightly) had parachuted into Thailand to aid the Free Thai Guerillas.

vi The Japanese pretext for the war was the liberation of East and Southeast Asia from colonial rule and the establishment of a “co-prosperity sphere” uniting the region against further exploitation by the Europeans and Americans. Once the Japanese were in control, the East and Southeast Asians discovered that their subjugation and exploitation by the Japanese turned out to be even worse.

had come to approve the show.

Outcomes

Geoffrey Gee was one POW who didn't appreciate the danger in which Gotla had placed their entertainment program:

Mr. Gotla should have known better. There have been American Red Cross parcels in camp now, for at least a week, but they show no signs of issuing them—Hence some of the vicious humour last night. High time the war was over. We are all longing for freedom.²¹

The Japanese and POW authorities demanded so many revisions to the script that it was impossible for Gotla to make the changes before the second performance. That being the case, both investigative groups agreed the second performance should be cancelled.

In addition, the POW administration reprimanded the theatre committee for allowing such “filth” to be produced. As punishment for his sins, Gotla would be sent up country on a maintenance party in the next rotation.²² This would act as a warning to other producers and entertainers not to trespass the boundaries of good taste, lest they follow him.

For the Japanese, these reprisals didn't go far enough. Furious about having been publicly mocked and unmasked, they threatened to ban all future performances. Only theatre committee chair Harold Pycock's close association with Kokubo saved the day. Knowing how much the Japanese depended on camp entertainment for maintaining their troops' morale, Pycock negotiated a compromise: “the performances were halted only for one month, and after that every piece had to be screened by the commandant with the help of a Japanese interpreter. No more insulting text or gestures of the Japs, or the theatre would be closed altogether.”²³

Gotla had gotten in trouble with both the Japanese and POW administrations for cutting too close to the bone—for revealing truths (and fears) better left unspoken and making light of them. Many playwright satirists, from Aristophanes to Molière to Mayakovsky, have found themselves in this very situation.

A New Type of Entertainment: Hut Concerts

While this kerfuffle was going on, the removal of Group IV troops to Tamuang, drafts to Japan, and the transfer of most of the medical staff and the chronically ill to Nakhon Pathom had reduced Chungkai to “a fit working camp” of about 5,000 men. The remaining POWs were put to work building an earthen bund to protect the camp from flooding during the monsoon season.²⁴

In the midst of this activity appeared a new type of entertainment: hut concerts. They had started in late May when the Australians in Group IV had given “farewell performances in the huts.”²⁵ By the end of the month, John Sharp noticed the hut concerts were “becoming popular—band musicians perform solo.”²⁶

Ukulele player Tom Boardman found these smaller venues more to his liking.²⁷ Upon returning to Chungkai from up country in early 1944, he had constructed a larger instrument and used it in these

shows.^{vii} Hut concerts, he recalled, were “‘off the cuff’ productions of a variety nature (comedians, singers, recitation, storytellers, jugglers, magicians, musical instrument players—guitars, violins, trumpet, accordion, etc.).”²⁸ The accordion player was, of course, his friend Frankie Quinton.^{viii}

By early June, so many men had left camp for other locations that John Sharp reported, “Camp looks deserted now.” He also noted some disturbing signs: “River is up considerably in the last two days. Changeable weather.”²⁹ The bund could not be completed soon enough.

Swan Songs

At the beginning of June, Group Commandant Yanagida moved his headquarters back to Chungkai from Takanun. Captain Noguchi was designated camp commandant making Kokubo his adjutant, and Colonel Williamson was once again installed as POW officer in charge.³⁰ When the ban on entertainment was lifted, Leo Britt was ready with a revival of *Café Colette*, one of his old touring shows from Changi days, starring Bobby Spong, Sam Drayton, John “Nellie” Wallace—and now with more time on his hands, Colonel Owtram.³¹ “I took the part of a red-tabbed and elderly Colonel with a penchant for the ladies,” Owtram wrote, “and was to be seen dining at the Café with a ‘vision of loveliness’ in the shape of Bobby Spong, and ending my part of the act with an excerpt from one of the better known musical comedies.”³²

Sharp found the show “very amusing,”³³ Gee thought it “[a] fine musical show,”³⁴ but Richardson disliked it heartily and gave it the worst review he had ever written: “Leo Britt show ‘Cafe Collette’; culturally in the gutter; quite the worst creatures, almost I’ve ever seen prancing on the stage.”³⁵

What elicited Richardson’s vehement response to Spong’s and Wallace’s portrayal of the two tarts in the show is not known. His negative reactions to Spong’s amorous antics have been noted before, but they stand in high contrast to his view of Spong back in Changi as a “luscious, seductive bitch who always looks like a forthright whore!”³⁶

As it turns out, *Café Colette* was Bobby Spong’s farewell performance. Shortly after his triumph in *Wonder Bar*, Spong shocked everyone when he volunteered for a Japan Party scheduled for departure in early June. Spong’s motivations for giving up his Chungkai stage career at its height were personal. According to the borehole rumor Gee heard, Spong was going “so that he could stick with his pal Vic Marshall.”³⁷ Volunteering for the same draft was singer Sam Drayton. For his final performance in Chungkai, Britt had given Drayton ten songs in the show.³⁸

Months later news reached Chungkai that the unmarked Japanese transport ship carrying Bobby Spong, Vic Marshall, Sam Drayton, and the other POWs on their way to Japan was sunk by an American submarine off Manila on 21 September.³⁹ Bobby Spong—one of the greatest and most beloved entertainers in the POW theatre in the Far East—did not survive.^{ix}

Neither did Sam Drayton:

It appears Sammy was thrown into the sea after his ship was torpedoed and tried to swim to a raft. Whether he was wounded or not is not known, but as he nearly reached the raft, urged on by its occupants, one of the survivors reached out to grasp Sammy’s hand. Their fingers touched, Sammy gave a weary smile and said, “Gee, ducks, I’m fucked,” and sank under the waves.⁴⁰

^{vii} See further information on the construction of this new ukulele in Chapter 12: “Jolly Good Show!”

^{viii} A puzzling question as to why Quinton was not a member of the orchestra or swing band would be answered if he did not read music.

^{ix} Read a more extensive treatment of Spong in Chapter 14: “Somebody Had To Put a Skirt On.”

June was also Gus Harffey's time to leave Chungkai. Having had enough of Britt and his "machinations," Harffey took up the offer the Japanese officer from Kanburi had made to form a concert party that would tour the up country camps, and he encouraged other Chungkai performers to join him. Among them were Frankie Quinton and the swing band drummer. On 13 June, Harffey and his "quota—of volunteers" left Chungkai for Kanburi.⁴¹ Their departure was not without hard feelings: "waved the party of 6 off by barge about 4.45. (Gus Harffey, Major Woods and 3 other stooge officers)," Gee wrote.^{x42}

Other ranks musician Wally Davis stepped forward to replace the departing drummer. Davis had been in hospital since December with malaria. On 16 June, the swing band—now identified as "Ken Wilson's Band"—opened *Sweet and Swing* with vocalists Larry Croisette and Cadder Parfitt.



FIGURE 6.27. PROGRAM COVER FOR *SWEET AND SWING*.
P. A. O. VAN VELTHUYSEN, HAN SAMETHINI COLLECTION.
COURTESY OF ROBIN KALHORN.

This time Richardson thoroughly enjoyed the show; it made him want to dance again.⁴³ He wasn't the only one. "A Nip jitterbug got on the stage and gave a performance," noted John Sharp.⁴⁴ Everyone in Chungkai was starved for this kind of energetic popular music, the end of the war, and the resumption of their normal lives.

Regardless of the huge interest in music and theatre, a crisis had developed that might spell entertainment's swan song as well. As the camp numbers shrank, box office receipts dropped precipitously and there was an urgent "appeal for support—the estimated expenditure for any one show is fifty baht."⁴⁵

Night Must Fall

One of the most talked about shows that ever appeared on the Chungkai stage was Leo Britt's production of Emlyn Williams' *Night Must Fall* that opened in late June.

Since the departure of "Fizzer" Pearson and some of his players in early May, Chungkai had not

^x Read more about Harffey's concert party activities at Kanburi in Chapter 9: "The Battle for Concerts."

witnessed a straight play. And Britt, recognizing the need for this type of theatre to round out the usual offerings, had been hard at work since *Wonder Bar* training “a select little company of his own” to fill the gap.⁴⁶ But *Night Must Fall* was not a comedy. It was a mystery-thriller: one of the most suspense-inducing plays ever written. Britt believed the POWs were ready for more complex characters and a plot more emotionally engaging than those in revues and musical comedies. This genre would be a first for Chungkai audiences, which made the theatre committee apprehensive about how the recovering POWs might be affected by it.



FIGURE 6.28. POSTER FOR *NIGHT MUST FALL*. GEOFFREY GEE. COURTESY OF HUGH DE WARDENER.

Gee designed an appropriately brooding scene on his poster, but advertising really wasn’t necessary. Britt’s reputation as a producer was so high that reserved seating for *Night Must Fall* was at a premium. On Monday 19 June, Gee “got into the booking queue at 10 o’clock . . . and procured 3 good 5c seats for Friday—the booking, as anticipated, was heavy and at closing time it was almost a case of ‘House Full!’ for the 2 nights.”⁴⁷

Night Must Fall opened on 23 June to rave reviews. Medical Officer Hardie thought the play “extremely well done, the tension being excellently maintained.”⁴⁸ Gee was thrilled with every aspect of the production:

The whole thing was first class from every angle: it’s wonderful what we prisoners-of-war can do! The cast were superb. . . . The décor and lighting were splendid and for the entire production Leo could take a big bow. The atmosphere was tense with the drama, the orchestra effective with incidental music and the audience (a packed one) keen and on edge . . . tonight’s production had a real professional touch. A great success.⁴⁹

“Splendid” lighting refers to designer E. L. Carr’s incorporation of the fading sunlight into the show’s lighting effects, thus making *Night Must Fall* even more “real” to the audience.^{xi}

Britt had cast the “three long difficult female roles” with Freddie Thompson as “the nasty old pathetic woman in her wheel-chair,” John “Nellie” Wallace as “the comic relief, the cook,” and, as Spong was bound for Japan, a daring choice for the young female lead—medical officer “Ginger” de Wardener as the “rather hysterical, morbid, queer young girl.”⁵⁰

More than fifty years later, de Wardener’s memories of his role in the production were still strong:

*And at the end, the last act, the entrance of this character—she comes in out of breath. So before coming in I ran like mad (it was easy to do at the site, you know, on the spot). So I came in . . . I was breathless. And I remember leaning against the wing, puffing away and looking at the audience. . . . And I paused a long time before [speaking].*⁵¹

Coast also recalled this moment: “I remember standing in the wings a yard from Ginger while he was leaning against the door of the room after discovering the murder of Mrs. Bramson by Dan in the Last Act, and to realise that that palpitating, nerve-wrecked girl in a green dress and glasses would be calmly taking our medical parade next morning, was very odd indeed!”^{xii52}

Tom Boardman thought “[de Wardener] was brilliant. . . . I can’t speak too highly of his performance.”⁵³ Of his friend Freddie Thompson’s success as the old woman, G. E. Chippington wrote jokingly, “Freddie will shortly be demanding his name in larger lettering on the posters.”⁵⁴ Reflecting on their celebrity status, de Wardener modestly said, “Mind you, as actors we had to realize they [the audience] were a ‘captive audience.’ There was no other entertainment. So they were glad to come to it.”⁵⁵

Night Must Fall was “voted the best play that was done in the camp,” wrote Owtram, who had a bit part.⁵⁶ And Dudley Gotla called it (along with Britt’s *Wonder Bar*) “remarkable, as near to professional standard as I have ever seen on an amateur stage.”⁵⁷ Britt’s hunch about the POWs’ emotional needs paid off: “with this one straight play that had surprised them completely,” wrote Coast, “the whole camp was greedy for more.”⁵⁸

“Rain Must Fall”

Even as *Night Must Fall* gained an excellent reputation as a well-acted production, it also gained a terrible reputation for never completing a performance. “‘Night Must Fall’ became known as ‘Rain Must Fall’ because every time they tried to put it on, it was washed out, [while] other shows remained dry,” noted Richard Sharp.⁵⁹ But Britt’s production “was so good that when the rain stopped the performance a second time, half a large audience stayed sitting it out in pouring rain in the dark till the show had to be stopped because the stage itself was flooded!”⁶⁰

The continued cancellation of the show due to rain created a problem for the theatre committee. In order not to refund the money from advance ticket sales badly needed to continue operations, *Night Must Fall* was allowed an extended run until all scheduled performances had been played out. But it took time: performances were cancelled because of heavy rain through the end of June . . . into July . . . and into

^{xi} For more about this innovative lighting, see Chapter 12: “Jolly Good Show!”

^{xii} Read more about the process de Wardener went through in creating this female role in Chapter 14: “Somebody Had to Put a Skirt On.”

August.

Breaking Down Barriers

In the meantime, two entertainment events went a long way toward breaking down the racial and ethnic prejudices still lingering in the camp.

Dutch/Indonesian producer-comedian Joop Postma was included in Charles Fisher's variety show *Garrison Theatre*, scheduled to open the week after *Night Must Fall* but postponed so Britt's show could try to complete its run. Medical Officer Fisher had first appeared on stage as Doctor Marco in Edwins' Christmas panto, *So Tite and the Seven Twirps*. He had also been associate producer for *Thai Diddle Diddle* but had obviously been absolved of any complicity in the sins of that production.



FIGURE 6.29. POSTER FOR *GARRISON THEATRE*.
IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE,
NETHERLANDS.

Adding Joop Postma to the cast of *Garrison Theatre* marked a significant effort on the part of British entertainers to start producing shows addressed to the whole camp by integrating Dutch/Indonesians into their performances where possible. Britt had included three Dutch/Indonesians in *Wonder Bar*, and Gotla had put two Dutch/Indonesian musicians on stage in *Diddle*, but persuading Postma, their erstwhile rival and competitor, to appear in a British production was a major coup. After this production, cross-casting became increasingly frequent and, in the long run, crucial to entertainment's survival in Chungkai.

Gee's account indicates Postma's appearance was not just a token gesture:

The other parts [for the show] were a sea scene adapted from a W. W. Jacobs short story "False Colors" in which Wimpy Burrows and Postma were outstanding. Eddie [Edwins] was the mainstay of "Garrison Theatre" but the "littul gel" was terrible. Highlight:—Col. Owtram and Capt Clarke duetting "I'll

See you again.” Next came the 3 Marx Bros. Out-west in which Postma excelled with Wimpy, Capt Fisher, Larry Croisette, Scats (?) Thompson, Fraser Martens were outstanding (the latter is a true-blue Yank). I thoroughly enjoyed the show—and was very much surprised later to find it hadn’t been popular.⁶¹

The other event involved an audition for a performer Eddie Edwins “discovered, a dancer who might agree to appear in his next show. Edwins was so excited about this possibility that he had to share the news with John Coast, and the two of them waited anxiously in the bamboo rehearsal space for the dancer to arrive from the hospital, where he was a patient in the malaria ward.

His name was Tari,^{xiii} and he was a brown, very well and strongly-built Eurasian, with tattoo marks and the head of a tiger on his chest. He spoke no word of English, but through a friend indicated that he would do two dances, a Monkey Dance and a King Dance; as they had no Javanese orchestra, they’d have to use dance music, and the tune finally decided upon was “The Cucaracha.” Tari then wanted to know how long he would be required to dance. “Well,” said Eddie, “how long do you usually dance?” “Oh,” said Tari laughing, “perhaps four hours!” “Well, I think four minutes of each will probably be enough,” said Eddie.⁶²

So Tari danced and Edwins and Coast were entranced—and eager to have him perform for the whole camp. His dance would introduce the non-Indonesians to a classical tradition other than their own. Before he could appear, Coast helped Tari acquire the proper attire.^{xiv63}

As stage manager, Coast described the magical moment when Tari stepped onto the stage for the first time:

As the music began Tari danced on from the wings, one hand pressed flat to his stomach, jerking his legs out straight before him in a half running attitude, and when he reached the centre of the stage he faced the audience, and from then on he was the Monkey King, the magnificent monkey, so clever and so handsome, who had fought for the Gods of Java against the Personification of Disaster!^{xv}

As he danced, the rhythm played insistently and fiercely on, the gigantic black shadows of the dancer caricaturing his movements on the dark backcloth. Suddenly—perhaps incorrectly—the music ceased! Tari dropped to the ground and bowed his head to terrific applause.⁶⁴

^{xiii} Actually, “Tari” is a nickname that means “dance.”

^{xiv} For more information about how Tari’s elaborate costume was made from scrounged material, see Chapter 12: “Jolly Good Show!”

^{xv} Coast was fascinated by the strange, delicate, and graceful movements of this Javanese dancer: “He rolled and shambled from side to side like a true ape; as he danced he flicked his selendang proudly behind him to show off his fine clothes; constantly he regarded himself smugly in the looking-glass of the waterfall, and each time he did so he raised a hand to his brow, palm downwards, his long, beautifully formed and curved fingers fluttering like birds’ wings before his eyes; when he wished to show his importance, by stretching up from his leg in a curious and hidden way, he seemed to grow inches taller” [Coast, 187].

As Edwins and Coast hoped, Tari's performance was an eye-opener. Richardson, normally reserved in his comments about Edwins' shows, praised this one and Tari's dancing in particular: "Variety Show. Eddie Edwins, his best. Edouard Bertling, Javanese (dancer to the Sultan Soenon of Solo, Central Java) danced the Monkey Dance (Hanuman) and Prince's Dance. Magnificent. Good Hawaiian dancing also."⁶⁵

Camp Update: A Show Camp

There was a noticeable change in the camp "atmosphere" the following day when Captain Noguchi announced a "no-slapping order" and that the *Bangkok Chronicle* would be allowed in camp again.⁶⁶ During the next few days, other amenities made their appearance: the barber shop was given its own hut, a (POW-built) reclining chair was installed, and copies of the colorful theatre posters were hung on the walls. However, no more rice sacks would be issued for use as blankets because they were ending up converted into deck chairs.⁶⁷ On 28 June the POWs were shocked when Noguchi "joined in a basketball game."⁶⁸ The POWs were also informed that due to the reduction in the number of inhabitants, the camp would be consolidated into a smaller perimeter. What were all these changes about?

As suspected, this unusual activity meant the Japanese were readying Chungkai as a "show camp" for a Red Cross inspection. At POW headquarters, Lieutenant W. W. Marsh was put to work designing new-style huts for the POWs and other camp beautification projects. On 22 July he wrote, "finished the contour map of the gardens & am now working out new paths & roadways there." In notes about the camp's consolidation, he mentioned that the present theatre would be located outside the revised boundaries, so it would have to be relocated inside the new perimeter.⁶⁹

Washout

Van Lach tot Lach (From Laugh to Laugh), produced by Joop Postma and Ferry van Delden, opened at the Chungkai theatre on 22 July. To make it more accessible to the non-Dutch speakers, it was compèred—in English—by someone named "Smeek." Postma, Ferry, Brugman, and Samethini highlighted the all-Dutch/Indonesian cast, though the performance was stage managed by Coast, and "Tug" Wilson and his swing band provided the music.



FIGURE 6.30. PROGRAM COVER FOR *FROM LAUGH TO LAUGH*. HUIB VAN LAAR. IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

Item #5 on the playbill was a “Lotus Dance”—but not the lotus dance that had had such a memorable effect on its audience back in April. This time a clown, probably Postma, “appeared out of the flower and did a drunken comedy dance.”⁷⁰ For those who had seen the original, this takeoff must have been doubly hilarious. Richardson thought it “an excellent show.”⁷¹ After it closed, “Tug” Wilson unexpectedly requested a transfer to Kanburi so he could join Gus Harffey’s new orchestra. Bass player Bill Bainbridge took over the ensemble.

From Laugh to Laugh had taken place just in time. On 26 July, both the Kwai Noi and the Mae Khlong rivers bordering the camp suddenly started to rise, causing serious flooding; patients in the hospital had to be evacuated to higher ground. Two days later the newly built earthen bund burst, leading to further evacuations and squeezing everybody into the few remaining huts.⁷²

One area hit hard by the flooding was the theatre. Although an excellent site for its purposes, it had been unwittingly built in a natural watercourse.⁷³ “Little Thai boats dart about the camp and tie up near the top of the Proscenium Arch of the theatre,” Coast observed, “where many people are bathing in the deep pool that was the auditorium only 24 hours ago.”⁷⁴

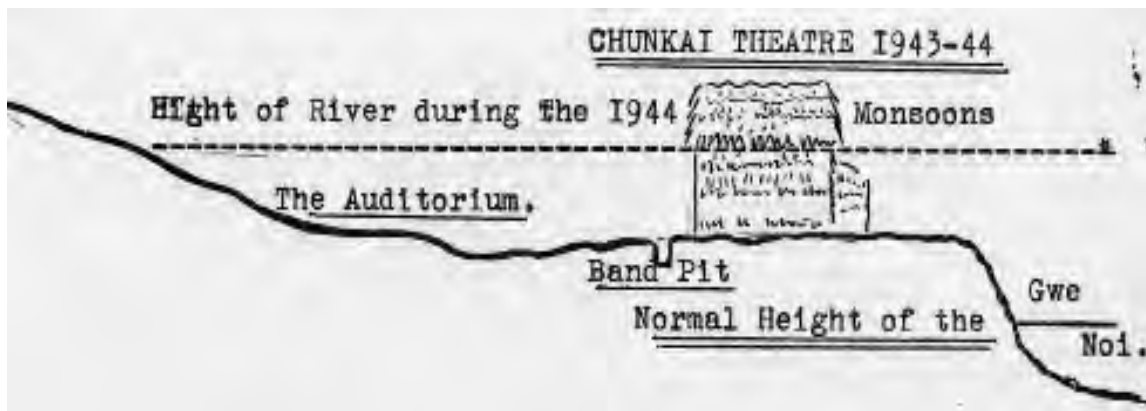


FIGURE 6.31. SKETCH OF FLOODED THEATRE. WALLY DAVIS. HAN SAMETHINI COLLECTION. COURTESY OF ROBIN KALHORN.

Wally Davis' sketch of the Chungkai theatre shows the extent of the flooding. Coast noted there was "three feet of water on the stage and ten feet in the auditorium."⁷⁵ Eddie Edwins' new show, scheduled for 29 July, was thought to be a washout.

But Edwins was not deterred by the flooding. At its height, he presented his show—billed this time as *Eddie's Road-Show*—on the basketball pitch, site of the old theatre, instead, advertised as "Free To All" (no reserved seating possible here).



FIGURE 6.32. POSTER FOR EDDIE'S ROAD SHOW. HUIB VAN LAAR. IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

For this new show Edwins continued his "mission" to integrate Dutch/Indonesian performers into his cast. This time he persuaded Brugman, Ferry, and Samethini as well as Postma to appear alongside the top British singers and a new novelty act called the "Timpani Twins." Under Bainbridge, the band

rebranded itself “The Swingtette.” Coast voiced the general sentiment when he wrote that Han Samethini “was the best [accordionist] any of us had ever heard, and he and the bass player [Bainbridge] made the Swingtet [*sic*] into a combination that would have been a genuinely high peace-time standard.”⁷⁶

Reality Check

By the last day of July, the floodwaters had started to recede although the weather was still rainy.⁷⁷ Hoping to keep the “congenial” atmosphere of the “model show camp” alive in the midst of this calamity—at least until the Red Cross inspection could take place—Colonel Yanagida allowed the POWs to receive more Red Cross packages, which, interestingly enough, contained many items bought locally.

Once the waters had fully receded, it was evident the flooding had been very destructive: Marsh’s new huts, carefully planned paths, and other beautification projects were a muddy mess. Given this reality check, the plans to show off Chungkai as a model camp were abandoned, and Colonel Yanagida decided to move his Group II headquarters across the river to Tamarkan, which sat on a high bank and had escaped flooding.^{xvi78}

In Chungkai, restoration of the theatre—which involved re-terracing the lower part of the amphitheatre, bailing out and then dredging out the orchestra pit, rebuilding the raised dirt base from where it had been washed away, and resurfacing the stage floor—took top priority. Ernest Lenthall’s *Musical Scrap Book* opened the restored theatre on 12 August—although its first performance, too, was stopped on account of rain.⁷⁹ This was not a good sign.



FIGURE 6.33. POSTER FOR *MUSICAL SCRAP BOOK*. KEMP.HAN SAMETHINI COLLECTION. COURTESY OF ROBIN KALHORN.

Kemp’s poster for the show includes a collection of caricatures of the Swingtette ensemble.

^{xvi} Did Captain Noguchi go with him? It is unclear in the record when Captain Noguchi was replaced by Lieutenant Kokubo as camp commandant.

Although *Night Must Fall* was still trying to complete its run, Britt opened his next show, *Bonnie Scotland*—an original musical—on 18 August. And Major Leofric Thorpe—the former general manager of the Mummie Bees back in Singapore—who had just returned from leading a maintenance party up country, suddenly found himself on stage: “That was the only proper play I ever had a part in, only as an understudy, when the actor, who had a good Scottish accent was unable to take part.”⁸⁰ *Bonnie Scotland* was an attempt to equal or better *Wonder Bar*, but it didn’t receive the same kind of rave notices.⁸¹

As soon as it was feasible, POWs were put to work rebuilding the earthen bund around the camp as the continual rainy weather, particularly the heavier rainfall occurring upriver, meant more flooding was possible. In fact, 1944 turned out to be an unusual double-flood year in Chungkai. As if on cue, the camp was flooded again and the cookhouses had to be moved to higher ground.⁸² The theatre was also flooded once more, but the overall damages were not as great as the first time. The roof was repaired with a large canvas tarpaulin borrowed from the Japanese.

An Anglo-Dutch Co-Production

John Coast’s close association with the Dutch/Indonesians on stage and off had inspired an Anglo-Dutch co-production. Tari (Bertling) was asked to train other Dutch/Indonesians as dancers and to choreograph a major piece for the new show. Tari “decided, in the end, to try to copy a famous palace dance that Europeans can see if they are lucky, performed several times a year at the Javanese Keratons in the central states.”⁸³

But to perform this traditional dance properly, he would need six female dancers, four male dancers, two sword dancers, two spear carriers, two clowns—and a *gamelan* orchestra. None of these performers or musical instruments existed. Neither did the elaborate setting of “painted elephants, a Royal Dais, and Magnificent looking draperies,” nor the costumes with “huge Wayang hats, slinky dresses, flowing *selendangs*, bracelets and ornaments.”⁸⁴

Coast admitted that acquiring the necessary mosquito nets, rice sacks, and cardboard for costumes and setting “made me cadge and steal as Stage Manager as I’d never done before.” And given the fierce competition among theatrical producers for scarce resources, it all had to be done secretly with the help of Bill Pycok.⁸⁵ Devising the gamelan orchestra was the most difficult part, but the Dutch/Indonesian POWs proved resourceful and scrounged the materials to make all the instruments.^{xviii86}

Once the volunteer dancers and musicians and the gamelan instruments were in place, a two-month period of intensive training began. If all went well, a unique entertainment would be performed for Chungkai audiences in October.

Camp Update: A Major Policy Change

In early September as the monsoon rains began to abate, there were urgent calls for more POWs to be sent up the railway line to repair washouts. With a decreased number of fit POWs in the camp, the selection committee was under intense pressure to find the necessary workers. To fill the quotas, Colonel Williamson announced a major policy change: the large number of fit POWs engaged in producing entertainment—men who had previously been exempt because their work was so valuable to the health of the camp—would now be subject to these drafts. In strong disagreement with Williamson’s decision,

xvii A *gendang* (drum) was made out of a hollow palm tree trunk, two gongs were made from square pieces of metal suspended over water pitchers filled to different levels, a *tote* (a type of xylophone with nine metal keys), and a *k trck* (a type of rattle made of metal and wire bound together) were all made from scrounged materials [Coast, 192–193].

medical officers did what they could to protect those they thought most important. “Because the Doctors thought the band good for Camp Morale,” Wally Davis wrote, “we were put on the Tamarkan Bridges Maintenance Workparty to avoid being sent away from camp.”⁸⁷ For the moment, the theatre committee and its staff, and producers like Leo Britt, were exempt.

This policy change nearly scuttled the chance for *Night Must Fall* to complete its run when “Ginger” de Wardener and Jack Milsum—two of the three leads in Britt’s production—were included in the first of these drafts. Why they were specifically selected is not known; there must have been other performers to choose from. But without Owtram in charge, Britt was not able to persuade Williamson to keep them off the list.^{xviii} De Wardener would function as medical officer in a maintenance party led by Lieutenant-Colonel Mapey (former chair of the theatre committee). Tom Boardman would be in the group as well.⁸⁸

Britt was given forty-eight hours to find replacements. Douglas Morris was persuaded to take over de Wardener’s role as Olivia. “It was a wonderful act of memorizing a script at short notice,” wrote his brother Terry. “He did a most fantastic job.”⁸⁹ Jack Malvern was brought in as a replacement for Milsum, who was sent up country on a different party. The last performance of *Night Must Fall* would take place on 8 September.⁹⁰

The policy change also threatened Coast’s production, slated for early October. In his case, “knowing well all the [Dutch] Adjutants and Sergeant Majors [, he was able to hold] back the essential dancers for several weeks in the teeth of their Dutch C.O’s.”⁹¹

But ten days before the show was scheduled to open, the inevitable happened: Tari, his dancers, and the gamelan orchestra received the news they would all be going up country on maintenance parties. Rather than being split up into various groups, they decided to go together. The Keraton dance, on which so much training and rehearsal time had been spent, would never be performed.⁹²

Instead, Tari repeated his Monkey King dance, this time with the gamelan orchestra, in Postma and Brugman’s new show, *Zijn Groote Reis* (*His Big Journey*, or, as advertised in English, *Eastward Ho!*), on 15–16 September.



FIGURE 6.34. PROGRAM COVER FOR *ZIJN GROOTE*. HUIB VAN LAAR. IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

xviii Britt’s cast may have been targeted to make clear to the whole camp that no one was going to receive special consideration.

This last-minute appearance was too late to be noted on the poster, which highlighted Harold Pycock's first appearance in a Chungkai show and a "Krontjong Band"^{xix} under the leadership of an Englishman named Worthington, who was captivated by this unique Javanese musical form.

Richardson thoroughly enjoyed *Zijn Groote Reis*: "a very good show. Décor excellent. Could have enjoyed much more of it. Gamelan orchestra. Koronchong dancing [*sic*] by Bertling [Tari]."^{xx93} (One setting in the "excellent décor" was, of course, the elaborate palace with elephants and royal dais designed especially for the Keraton dance in Coast's show.)

Chippington was enthralled by Tari's dance as the Monkey King, which opened his eyes to a world he knew nothing about:

One performance which has made an impact on all of us was an extraordinary dance by a Eurasian with the Dutch contingent from Java—backed by a group of Javanese musicians playing their traditional instruments (all home made). Fantastically dressed as a very realistic monkey, elaborately decorated, he performed the Javanese 'monkey' dance—a part of their culture, I understand. . . . Everyone was spell bound under that dark blue sky sparkling with a myriad stars bathed by the soft glow of the full moon. A wonderful experience.⁹⁴

When Coast said good-bye to Tari and his dancers and musicians as they headed up country, he must have wondered if he would ever see them again. Despite this major setback to his own production, Coast was determined to carry on.

"Are We Men or Mice?"

On 18 September, orders issued from Japanese headquarters sought to reduce the profits being made by POW entrepreneurs in the camp: "shave and haircuts to be free, also theatre seats." With only 2,800 men left in camp, John Sharp thought this a "questionable benevolence."⁹⁵ Four days later, Edwins' new show, *Mixed Grill*, was cancelled when the Japanese abruptly took back their pressure lamps, on loan to the theatre, to finish building their new office. It opened the following night instead—but with disastrous results. In the interval Edwins had gone into hospital with another bout of malaria and "Hank the Yank" Martens stepped into the role of compère. This time his "true-blue" Yankee-ness was a little too blue. His jokes were considered so "filthy" that Martens was "rebuked by the camp C. O. [Williamson]" and banned from further performances. (It was rumored that Martens had already been banned in other camps for similar behavior.)⁹⁶

Gee agreed that Martens' jokes were "very dirty," but he took a different attitude about the furor: "It strikes me that there's a lot of hypocrisy in this camp 'cos it seemed last night that people were enjoying this fun. Anyway, this is a male community, the one place where you can safely talk a bit of dirt. Are we men or mice?"⁹⁷

^{xix} The Javanese *kronchongs* music is melodic music and singing using Western instruments but played with a unique beat.
^{xx} Obviously a confusion here.

The Chungkai Rep Company

Following the success of *Night Must Fall*, Leo Britt began to present—almost exclusively—a series of straight plays with a small troupe of actors who became the “Chungkai Repertory Company.”^{xxi98} “The era of straight plays had started and was to go on, in ambition and popularity,” wrote Richard Sharp. “And the odd thing is that troops who have never before seen a straight play, lap them up and ask for more.”⁹⁹

With only a limited number of scripts available in the camp library, how could they possibly satisfy this hunger? Leofric Thorpe came to the rescue. His years of experience directing shows for the Island Committee community theatre back in Singapore before the war proved invaluable. “I also remembered complete scripts of plays,” Thorpe recalled, “which was not difficult when I had been active before the captivity in putting the plays on at the Victoria Theatre in S’pore. ‘The Amazing Doctor Clitterhouse’ was one I remembered line for line.”¹⁰⁰ (Leo Britt had been an actor in that production.)



FIGURE 6.35. POSTER FOR *THE AMAZING DR. CLITTERHOUSE*. HUIB VAN LAAR.
IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

In fact, Britt’s next show was Barré Lyndon’s *The Amazing Dr. Clitterhouse*, which ran 29–30 September with Captain “Schoolie” Faulder in the title role. Since Coast was fully engaged in final rehearsals for his own production, he could not function as Britt’s stage manager, which did not please Britt, who thought his shows should receive Coast’s attention and priority. So along with recalling the script “line by line,” Thorpe took on the duties of stage manager—a role he performed for all of Britt’s subsequent Chungkai productions.¹⁰¹

But *The Amazing Dr. Clitterhouse* did not connect with its audience, which was expecting the same dramatic tension and excitement as in *Night Must Fall*. Gee’s response was typical: “I didn’t care for the show at all. It didn’t pack a wallop!”¹⁰²

On Your Toes

To avoid being sent up the line in the latest clamor for maintenance party workers, Gee took a full-time position with the theatre’s front of house staff. Besides painting posters, additional duties in this official role involved creating the paper tickets needed for each performance and ushering on performance nights.¹⁰³ He was also enlisted to help backstage with the scene painting on Coast’s show, set to open that night: “I was called to the Theatre by Mr. Knight to help them out with some scene painting as they were

^{xxi} The members of Britt’s rep company were Allan Alexander, “Schoolie” Faulder, Sam Flick, Bob Garrod, Gibby Inglefield, Douglas Morris, Howard Potts, Freddie Thompson, and Michael Walter.

choc-a-block with work. I got busy on a backcloth for the band presentation. Was very busy but happy amongst the whitewash and soot.”¹⁰⁴

But the opening was suddenly cancelled when I. J. A. Group II headquarters in Tamarkan “requisitioned canvas roof of theatre” for a theatre they were constructing there in celebration of their founding as a military unit. With heavy rain falling intermittently, the scene painters’ push to finish the backdrops came to a halt. The tech crew came to Coast’s rescue and constructed a new pitched roof out of atap so his production could open two days later.¹⁰⁵ But that opening was cancelled as well on account of rain.

On Your Toes: A Contrasted Programme of Dancing & Music finally opened on 8 October at 8:45 p.m. Coast’s unique collaboration with Philip Brugman and John “Nellie” Wallace would have been a daring production to find on the London or New York stage, but in a remote POW camp on the edge of the jungle in Thailand, it was truly astonishing. The late start time signaled that lighting effects would be used throughout.^{xxii}



FIGURE 6.36. POSTER FOR *ON YOUR TOES*. GEOFFREY GEE. IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

Gee’s colorful poster lists seven acts, each highlighted in separate boxes. In place of the Javanese Keraton dance with Tari and his company, Brugman had hastily created a spectacular “Balinese Ballet” based on the traditional Ketjak Monkey Dance.

^{xxii} See Chapter 12: “Jolly Good Show! more information about the innovative lighting devised for this production.

The *pièce de résistance* of the evening was the twenty-three-minute version of *The Sleeping Beauty Ballet* choreographed by Wallace to music by Tchaikovsky, Grieg, and others (Wallace had professional training as a ballet dancer before enlisting in the army).¹⁰⁶ Coast described the setting as “a Walt Disney style of a forest with red toadstools and a little bent house.”¹⁰⁷

The cast for the ballet included “Prince Charming, a Witch, the Sleeping Beauty, eight fauns and four dwarfs!”¹⁰⁸ One of the fauns was Custance Baker in his “first stage part . . . wearing a minimal loincloth and a strip of fur round my ankles. We danced a simple graceful number to the tune of Grieg’s Morning Music.”¹⁰⁹

This serious attempt to dance Tchaikovsky’s well-known classical ballet had not happened without complications, as Prince Charming after Prince Charming was sent either up country or into hospital. During the final week of rehearsals, the following announcement had to be posted regarding the fate of the latest premier dancer, Tom Slessor.

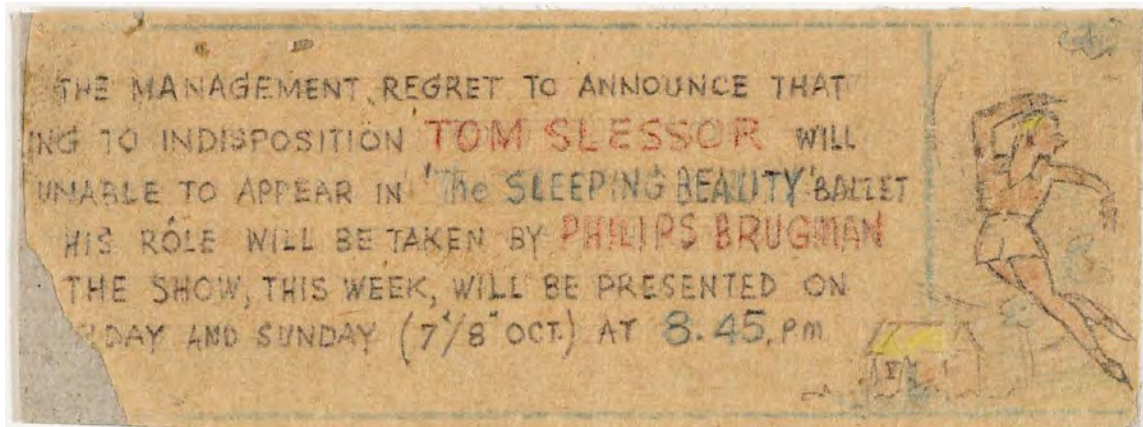


FIGURE 6.37. CAST CHANGE ANNOUNCEMENT. IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

“Owing to indisposition” was a polite way of saying that Slessor was in hospital with dysentery.

For Coast, the “standard of dancing attained by the chief three [dancers] was simply astounding. The Witch pirouetted to flashes of lightning and rolls of thunder, and the Prince and the Beauty performed the intricate “Sleeping Beauty Waltz” perfectly together in the Finale.”¹¹⁰ Wallace himself danced the role of the Sleeping Beauty.

Richardson thought the dance show “very good.”¹¹¹ It was Gee, this time, who proved more discriminating in his criticism:

The band was not as good as usual. Scottish dancing didn’t appeal. Balinese Ballet good but badly lit. Jimmy O’Connor’s “Seat Dance” colossal! Postma amazing with “Sailor’s Hornpipe.” Lambeth Walk a hit. Tango & Rhumba v. good and finally “The Sleeping Beauty” ballet by John Wallace. Superb! Beautiful! And the décor looked wonderful. It was Brugman’s evening—tho’ Taeke took the spotlight with his Tyrolean “dive”!¹¹²

The opening performance concluded with a speech by Colonel Yanagida, who announced that the camp was being moved to a new and less vulnerable site. He promised the POWs a prime location for their beloved theatre (Coast would later call it “a new but inferior site on the other side of the camp”¹¹³).

Now considered part of the official theatre staff, Gee was invited backstage for the opening night celebration: “All the fun of the theatre. Everyone congratulating each other.”¹¹⁴ The following night, after his ushering duties were done, Gee “dashed backstage to speedily paint more trees etc. on the wings for the ballet finale”—possible to do while the show was in progress because the Chungkai theatre’s wings were double faced—and “stayed there for the rest of the show. What an atmosphere! Theatreland!—with elves and fauns, Tyrolean dancers, Witches etc. And Nellie Wallace throwing a blue fit when Mr. Lenthal played the wrong cues!! It was all grand. I loved it and hope to be there more in the future.”¹¹⁵ With this induction into the special bond enjoyed by theatre practitioners, Gee became part of the “theatre crowd.”

When Leo Britt attended *On Your Toes* and saw what precious “resources” Coast had been able to finagle without his knowledge (including fantastic costumes and settings and “multiple coloured spotlights”), he threw a “blue fit” as well. He confronted Coast after the show; they had a huge row and “parted company for good.”¹¹⁶

3. “Outward Bound”

Removal Difficulties

Major difficulties were encountered in trying to move the theatre to its new location, so the POWs decided to rebuild it, enlarging it to serve the needs of producers and technical staff who were always trying to present something new and different. This endeavor took more time than originally expected. When the Swingtette performed on 10 October, Gee reported the theatre was “only ½ built.”¹¹⁷ And it was still not finished when Edwins produced *Mixed Grill* on 20 October—or a week later when *Stockpot*, a variety show written and produced by a new producer, Leslie J. Stock, was presented.¹¹⁸

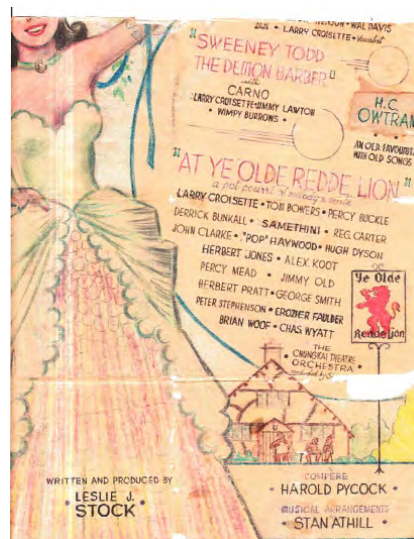


FIGURE 6.38. POSTER FOR *Stockpot*. GEOFFREY GEE.
COURTESY OF JASON STAGGS.

The cast list given on the poster is a mix of old regulars and new faces. At the top right, Colonel Owtram's name has been pasted over that of the original performer. Gee explained that Owtram had "filled in the breach left by up country party."¹¹⁹

The "up country party" Gee refers to was a touring concert party led by Ernest Lenthall with most of the Chungkai orchestra musicians. After their success at the I. J. A. celebration in Tamarkan on 15 and 16 October (a concert for which Gee had painted backdrop screens: "one big one of a map of Thailand with Railway Engine thrusting out of corner"¹²⁰), Lenthall had received orders to take his musicians on a week-long tour up country to entertain the POWs and I. J. A. guards in their isolated maintenance camps. They would leave on 31 October and travel by river barge as far up the line as Kinsaiyok.¹²¹ "It was band vocalist Cadder Parfitt who had dropped out of *Stockpot* to go with them.

Theatre Update: The New Chungkai Theatre

By 1 November construction work on the new theatre was finally complete. As on its previous site, the stagehouse was situated on a raised platform at the bottom of a slope that had been terraced into seating for an amphitheatre. Instead of the "great dusty bowl" of the old theatre, this amphitheatre was covered with grass and enlarged to accommodate an audience of 3,000. As the new amphitheatre was more flat and open, some POWs mourned the loss of their "old intimate theatre."^{xxiii122}

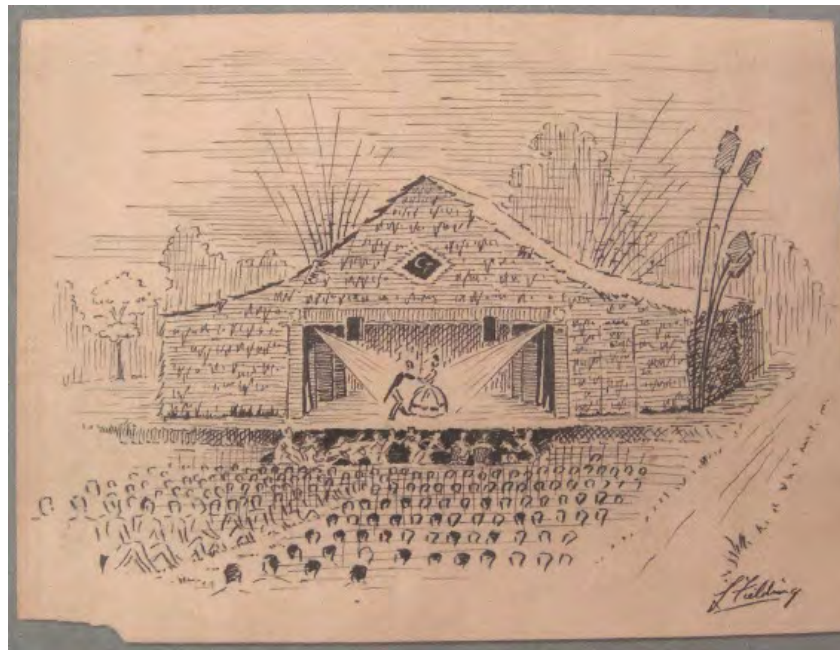


FIGURE 6.39. THE NEW CHUNGKAI THEATRE. LESLIE FIELDING. FEPOW IWM 155936.

Leslie Fielding's sketch shows the new Chungkai theatre looking quite different from its predecessor. The pitched roof is much higher, allowing settings and set pieces to be flown in and out from a grid. In the center of the proscenium header is the new Chungkai theatre logo. Behind the theatre can be

^{xxiii} It's strange to think of a theater with an auditorium that seated 2,000 or more as "intimate," but the new location lacked the "embrace" of the old amphitheatre that was similar to the Hollywood Bowl.

seen the grove that contained the “bamboo rehearsal space.” With the theatre’s opening, one of Gee’s jobs was to “paint up the [new] seating index.”^{xxiv123}

On Short Notice

A show by Michael Walter, a member of Britt’s rep company, was scheduled to open the theatre but cancelled at the last minute when Walter became ill and sent to hospital. In the day-to-day sameness of their prison existence, the POWs had become ever more dependent on their weekly entertainment for emotional and mental sustenance, so it was of vital importance not to let the theatre “go dark” for a week. Though he was in rehearsal with his new show, Leo Britt stepped into the gap with a hastily devised recreation of a nineteenth-century minstrel show, and *Oh Susannah!* opened the new theatre on 4 November. The two figures in period dress standing in spotlights at the front of the stage in Fielding’s sketch present a scene from this production.



FIGURE 6.40. POSTER FOR *OH SUSANNAH*. GEOFFREY GEE. IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

Though rushed into production, Britt’s “white coons” show^{xxv}—white actors impersonating African Americans in blackface—was a huge success. “Everybody happy,” wrote Gee. “Thanks, in the main, are no doubt due to Leo for his efforts.”¹²⁴ Britt himself played the master of ceremonies (the “Interlocutor”), and Jimmy O’Connor “scored a hit with his eccentric dancing.” Among the other performers were Freddie Thompson, Joop Postma, Philip Brugman, Mike Sands (as Susannah), and a “chorus of Niggers.”¹²⁵ The show was so popular that the next night it went on, despite a soaking rain, “with a fairly good (and enthusiastic) audience, considering the state of the ground.”¹²⁶

Camp Update: Further Raids on Theatre Personnel

On 14 October, Lieutenant-Colonel Williamson and his headquarters staff were removed to Tamarkan as the result of a flap over new orders requiring all officers to engage in manual labor, and

^{xxiv} See Chapter 12: “Jolly Good Show!” for details.

^{xxv} A derogatory racist term used to identify minstrel shows performed by white performers over against minstrel shows performed by black performers (also in blackface).

Owtram was back in charge once again.^{xxxvi} A week later orders were received from Group II headquarters for all the POWs in hospital to be evacuated to Tamarkan and all the fit POWs to be sent up country.¹²⁷ But finding fit men available for maintenance parties became more difficult, so in order to fill the quotas, two further policy changes were made: light sick POWs and members of the theatre staff would now be included in the maintenance drafts. On 9 November, two box office workers were sent up country. And the next day, Joop Postma, Philip Brugman, and their cabaret troupe—in final rehearsals with their new show, *Lichten Op!* (Lights Up!)—received word they were leaving as well.



FIGURE 6.41. POSTER FOR *LICHTEN Op!* IMAGE
COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

Lichten Op!—a new co-production by John Coast’s “Engelsch-Hollandsche” company—was to be an international musical extravaganza. The large cast of singer-actors and musicians—a phenomenal collection of “stars” from both the British and Dutch/Indonesian concert parties (see poster)—would have been a major contribution to the new drive to cooperate instead of compete in supplying entertainment to the troops, but with the loss of Postma and his troupe, the show had to be cancelled. Gee, for one, thought it particularly upsetting they should be sent up country: “What a pity they must go. For a long time they have been wangled off previous parties ’cos of their invaluable services to our entertainment here in Chungkai.”¹²⁸ No further Dutch/Indonesian performances or cross-casting experiments would take place until their return.

The Chungkai Repertory Company Presents

As the only established producer-director left in Chungkai, Britt was under considerable pressure

^{xxxvi} With very few other ranks left in Chungkai, the officers had been ordered to engage in manual labor once again. This time they refused, so the light sick left in camp were forced to work a half day. This decision resulted in the officers holding a mass meeting during which they “refused to work as long as Colonel Williamson was the camp commandant—as he was too weak with the Nips” [John Sharp, Diary, 14 October 1944]. The officers petitioned Group Commandant Yanagida for his removal, Colonel Williamson was ordered to Tamarkan, and Colonel Owtram was placed in charge at Chungkai once again. Now everyone worked. It’s possible that this was when Captain Noguchi was replaced by Lieutenant Kokubo as camp commandant as well.

to have his rep company perform more frequently. On 10 November, they had opened Hubert Griffith and Paul Vulpius' play *Youth at the Helm*.

Compared to *Doctor Clitterhouse*, the audience response this time was positive. Richardson praised it as "an excellent show. Good acting and very amusing."¹²⁹ Gee thought there were "superb performances from Michael Walter, Gilbert Inglefield, Howard Potts, Freddie Thompson et al. A huge success!"¹³⁰

Two days later, on 12 November, Gee was in the box office working on the poster for *50/50*—the show John "Nellie" Wallace was hastily assembling as a replacement for Postma's *Lichten Op!*—when he was told he was on the roster for one of the next up country maintenance parties. Singer Larry Croisette and producer Eddie Edwins also got the bad news—and Bill Bainbridge and Wally Davis from the Swingtette as well. But someone with authority convinced the POW administration that all the members of the Swingtette must be kept together, so at the last minute Bainbridge and Davis were taken off the list.

The next day Gee left Chungkai and traveled by train up the line to Rin Tin/183 Kilo, where he and others were put to work quarrying rocks for ballast and chopping down trees for kindling for the steam engines.¹³¹ R.S.M. Bill Nelson attempted to mount concert parties there, but Gee thought them "amateurish" and longed "for Chungkai and its excellent theatre."¹³² In late December, suffering from a bad case of malaria, Gee would be sent down to Tamarkan.

The Chungkai Reps' next production was *Accent on Youth* by American playwright Samson Raphaelson. Though no longer on speaking terms with Britt, Coast openly admired his abilities to inspire his actors and production staff to ever-greater achievement.¹³³ These last two shows had required the props crew to construct a radiogram [console radio] and a baby grand piano.^{xxvii}

Reviews of the show were mixed. W. Marsh thought it "extremely well done, particularly as it involved playing two sophisticated female roles."¹³⁴ (These "females" were new rep company members Dick Lucas and Custance Baker.) Richardson, on the contrary, thought it had been "a dreadful play and much poor acting. Generally antique."¹³⁵

Camp Update: About-Face

With the Allied offensive in Burma under way, the two bridges spanning the Mae Khlong River at Tamarkan being used to funnel fresh men and supplies to the Japanese troops at the front became strategic targets for Allied long-range bombers. For quite some time, Allied reconnaissance ("recce") planes had been seen over the camp in preparation for bombing attacks on the bridges. The first of these raids took place in the early evening of 29 November. The next day, the POWs in Chungkai learned that bombs had fallen in Tamarkan, killing twenty of their men, most of whom had only transferred there the day before.¹³⁶ In spite of the raid, the Japanese inexplicably continued to evacuate more POWs from Chungkai to Tamarkan, including all of the senior officers except Colonel Owtram.¹³⁷

During the first week of December, Lieutenant-Colonel Yanagida was reassigned to Nakhon Pathom hospital camp and Lieutenant-Colonel Ishii arrived from Nakhon Pathom to become the new commandant of Group II. In the second full week in December, new bombing raids on the bridges, including the railway support facilities and airfield at Kanburi, produced the desired results: almost all traffic on the railway came to a halt. In the face of these continuing attacks, the I. J. A. finally acknowledged the obvious and made an abrupt about-face, ordering all the POWs in Tamarkan transferred to Chungkai. This reversal caused much confusion, and Chungkai became severely overcrowded once again, its resources strained to

^{xxvii} See more about the construction of these props in Chapter 12: "Jolly Good Show!".

their limits.¹³⁸

The first group to arrive on 16 December included Major Jim Jacobs, the officer in charge of the Tamarkan Players. Their leading theatrical producer-director Norman Carter would soon follow. The phased evacuation of the large contingent of Australian and Dutch/Indonesian POWs from Tamarkan to Chungkai continued well into the new year.

The Chungkai Rep Carries On

Jacobs arrived in Chungkai just in time to see Leo Britt's production of Noel Coward's comedy-farce *Hay Fever* on 18 December.

Custance Baker, cast this time in "a longer part of an older woman," summarized the plot: "Mostly mixed up couples having violent kiss and cuddle scenes and dashing outdoors to avoid each other: 'Anyone for Tennis?'"^{xxviii139} Baker's "kiss and cuddle scene" with Leo Britt, who played the male lead, was a sensation.^{xxix140}

Richardson thought the production "not too bad, but acting generally poor."¹⁴¹ Jacobs thought differently: "a talented cast of British officers treated an appreciative audience to an excellent performance."¹⁴²

Christmas 1944

Christmas 1944 would be the POWs' third Christmas in captivity, and with news of the recent Japanese losses in the Pacific heard on their secret radio and the continued Allied bombing of the Tamarkan bridges and points southeast, they firmly believed it would be their last.



FIGURE 6.42. POSTER FOR *THE CHRISTMAS SPIRIT*. IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

On Christmas Eve, *The Christmas Spirit*, a carol service led by Gibby Inglefield and his choir, was presented on stage in imitation of the traditional carol service broadcast each year on the BBC from King's College Chapel at Cambridge University. The elaborate staging with a setting designed to represent the interior of the chapel was described by Baker who sang in the choir:

^{xxviii} "I actually wore a pretty white tennis frock with a pleated skirt and white shoes, which I made myself," Baker continued. "On the second night I almost dried but one of the cast fed me my words so that I did not have to take a prompt" [Baker, "Extracts from 'A Memoir,'" 14].

^{xxix} See more about these "kiss and cuddle" scenes in Chapter 14: "Somebody Had to Put a Skirt On."

On the night, one night only, the choir was placed in these stalls hidden behind a mosquito netting gauze curtain. A radio announcer with a microphone in his hand stood alone in front of the curtain and told the audience that a radio broadcast of carols from King's College would now be presented. The gauze curtain was raised just like a pantomime transformation scene and disclosed a group of choristers in white surplices lit up by our two tilly lamps and little oil lamps disguised as candles, in a row of stalls which really did appear to stretch away into a dark interior. We sang the usual proper carols and Inglefield introduced some less common ones. . . . Members of the audience told me that the illusion of the interior of a College chapel had been very convincing and nostalgic.¹⁴³

One of those audience members was Richard Sharp: "With the choir, dressed as choristers (out of mosquito netting) in a setting of Cathedral stalls: Kings Chapel, we felt, could not do better."¹⁴⁴

The following evening, audiences saw Carl Moser's pantomime *Cinderella* directed by Britt. Custance Baker, who played the Fairy Godmother, wrote that the pantomime "was presented in an atmosphere of hope and confidence."¹⁴⁵

Jacobs was delighted with the production: "In the panto, a handsome young English subaltern, Dicky Lucas, made a charming Cinderella. Captain Freddie Thompson was the principal comedian [Pantomime Dame], and was ably assisted by a capable cast."¹⁴⁶ Basil Peacock, who "laughed uproariously" throughout the show, was also taken with Lucas: "I shall never forget the sight of Cinderella (one of our younger and prettier subalterns) going to the ball in a golden coach and waving to us like royalty."¹⁴⁷ Richard Sharp thought the panto had been "a wow!"—so good, in fact, that he returned to see it again the second night.¹⁴⁸ Even Richardson thought it a "great success."¹⁴⁹

John Coast, in hospital with a new attack of malaria, missed the show but confessed that the Christmas performance had not just been a "great success," it had been "a drunken, raging success," with most of the cast and crew performing under the influence.¹⁵⁰

1945

If there was any official New Year's Eve celebration in Chungkai, there is no record of it. Everyone was too busy trying to find accommodations for the Australians and Dutch/Indonesians continuing to arrive daily from Tamarkan. New Year's Day, though, was a different story. Sports competitions between Japanese soldiers and POWs were held during the day at Kokubo's order. In the evening, Britt produced a revival of *Café Colette*.

Colonel Owtram, who reprised his role of the "red-tabbed and elderly colonel" in the show, recalled a personal anecdote connected to this production that made his performance that night a "must see":

It was a blazing hot day, and about 11 a.m. Kokobo [sic] summoned me and my Dutch interpreter to watch the sports with him. We sat in front of the crowd out on the sports ground and he produced a bottle of Chinese Brandy which we proceeded to drink neat. We got through that without any difficulty, but at the end he asked me to go back to his quarters as he said he wished to offer

me his hospitality to show his appreciation of the way in which I had run the Camp while he had been in charge! I had no desire to accept, but to refuse would have been a grave insult and the camp would have suffered in consequence.¹⁵¹

Owtram and the Dutch interpreter followed Kokubo to his quarters, where a bottle of whisky was produced. When they had almost consumed that bottle, Kokubo got the idea of including more of Owtram's staff in the celebration. They were summoned, and once they arrived another bottle appeared. "I was getting to the point where I had to think very hard what I was going to say and things appeared a bit hazy," Owtram recalled. Some food appeared, and after it was consumed they were able to leave. Owtram made it back to headquarters, laid down, and "sank into a deep sleep immediately which lasted from about 3 p.m. until 7 p.m. when considerable concern was felt because I was due to take part in a 'Café Colette' show at 8 o'clock."¹⁵²

A medical officer was called, Owtram was awakened and given two Benzedrine tablets, which made him very wide awake, and he "was able to appear on the stage even though still a bit 'under the influence'":

By this time, of course, the whole camp knew about my session with Kokobo and they flocked to the show to see what effect it had had on me. I remember receiving terrific applause on my entrance onto the stage. All went well until I missed the cue for me to say goodbye to the "lovely"^{xxx} with whom I was dining and make my exit singing "I'll see you again"! Leo Britt who was playing the part of the "Maestro," seeing I had missed my cue, gave me a more direct one, but still having my head full of fumes, I ignored that too, much to the delight of the audience. Eventually I did realize the situation and made my exit singing in terrific form. The show was voted a great success!¹⁵³

Custance Baker also had a favorite anecdote occasioned by the show. He called it "My best theatre crit!"^{xxxii154} Cast as prostitutes, he and Dick Lucas "did a dance routine to the tune of 'Yam' a popular song of the thirties. We danced separately and then as a pair, finally in a chorus line. When walking back to my hut after the show I overheard two soldiers, one of whom I knew, discussing the show: 'Those two fucking tarts, they were more like real fucking tarts than any fucking tarts I've ever met.'"^{xxxiii155}

Camp Update: The New Order

With his drinking party, Kokubo had wanted to thank Owtram before Lieutenant-Colonel Ishii arrived from Tamarkan to assume command. He knew that with Ishii in charge, relationships between the Japanese and the POWs were about to change for the worse.

Following his arrival, Ishii made his first move on 5 January to show who was in charge by ordering "concert performances reduced to one night."¹⁵⁶ This directive was a blow to the approximately 9,000 or so

^{xxx} Who the "lovely" was this time is not identified. It wasn't Baker, so it must have been Dick Lucas.

^{xxxii} British theatre slang for "critical review."

^{xxxiii} The excerpts from Custance Baker's diary were made available to me in the spring of 2012. I was told this anecdote previously by Leofric Thorpe, who thought the comment had been made about the female impersonators in Wonder Bar.

POWs in Chungkai, as Hardie estimated the “theatre only holds at most a third of the camp.”¹⁵⁷ According to Coast, had it not been for Bill Pycock operating behind the scenes to prevent more drastic measures, “Ishi [sic] would probably have stopped entertainments altogether.”¹⁵⁸ “Under Ishii, the conditions of life have at once become more irksome,” Hardie wrote, “because all the tinpot Jap authorities feel they must be extra officious under the colonel’s eye.”¹⁵⁹ This, of course, included Kokubo.

Everyone, officers and other ranks alike, was put to work building huts again. In addition, the POWs were ordered “to build a moat ten feet deep with a far bank eighteen feet high all around the camp.”¹⁶⁰ Now that the possibility of flooding was past for the year, the need for this fortress-like construction was puzzling.

When John Coast came out of hospital following his latest malaria attack, he discovered that he had lost his “exempt status” position on the theatre committee. Under Ishii, the committee was forced to limit the number of personnel exempt from manual labor because of their involvement in entertainment. Coast “joined the Officers Working Party once again.”¹⁶¹

The POWs’ high hopes about a quick end to the war was not to last. “After the festive season, during which we had been too optimistic, we relapsed into pessimism as we received news of the German winter offensive, and then no news at all,” wrote Peacock. “As far as we could judge, the situation in Burma was still a stalemate, and there was unbeaten Japanese armies between us and liberty.”¹⁶²

Since 1942, this reversal from optimism to pessimism after the holidays had become a familiar pattern, but with each year’s passing, the disappointment grew deeper. By the end of the month, POWs in Chungkai were depressed and apathetic. “Finding life as P.O.W. increasingly tedious and dull; periodically good interest,” admitted Richardson. “Powers of concentration declining and periodically good.”¹⁶³ His words described the deadly “war within” that the few entertainers left in camp struggled mightily to combat and whose efforts Ishii worked steadily to undermine.

Maintenance Party Entertainers Return

By mid-January, work on the moat and the bund surrounding the camp was well under way as the maintenance parties with important entertainment personnel began to return.

Arriving from Tamarkan, where they had been retained since just before Christmas, were Eddie Edwins, Larry Croisette, Fred Coles, and Geoffrey Gee. During their absence, Chungkai had, in Gee’s words, “considerably changed (for the worse). Liberties curtailed. Theatre only 1 night (Mon). Lights out 10 o’clock. Piss Pickets. Registering books, etc. Bathing area restricted and new Col (Ishi) [Ishii] bit of a _____. No church services on Sundays. On Mondays if Yasume!” In addition, Gee discovered that Bill Bainbridge was now in charge of the Chungkai musicians—Lenthall had resigned sometime earlier—and only a fixed number of men could work in the theatre at any one time.¹⁶⁴

Returning directly from up the line were Hugh de Wardener, Keith Neighbour, Tom Boardman, and the rest of the 201 Kilo party. At Christmas, de Wardener had produced an original pantomime, *The Isle of Pochohuntas Treasure*, in which Boardman, swollen with the endemic effects of beriberi, played the Fairy Queen. To the POW audience, this affliction only made his appearance more hysterical.¹⁶⁵

Shortly thereafter, Dudley Gotla, Joop Postma, Philip Brugman, and the Dutch/Indonesian cabaret troupe returned from Kinsaiyok. For their Christmas festivities, Gotla and Postma had put on a bilingual production of the pantomime *Jack and the Beanstalk (Ian und der Bonenstolk)*.¹⁶⁶ It took little imagination for the POWs to recognize Jack’s imprisonment as mirroring their own or the real identity of the Giant as their captors, who too often in their experience had sung, “*Fee, Fi, Fo, Fum—I smell the blood*

of an Englishman!” The pantomime was a message of hope that they could survive against enormous odds.

Major Barbara

On 15 January, Britt’s repertory company presented their most challenging production to date: George Bernard Shaw’s comedy *Major Barbara*—challenging because it required intelligent actors with the ability to handle the Shavian wit while still leading audiences through the various points of Shaw’s dialectical argument.

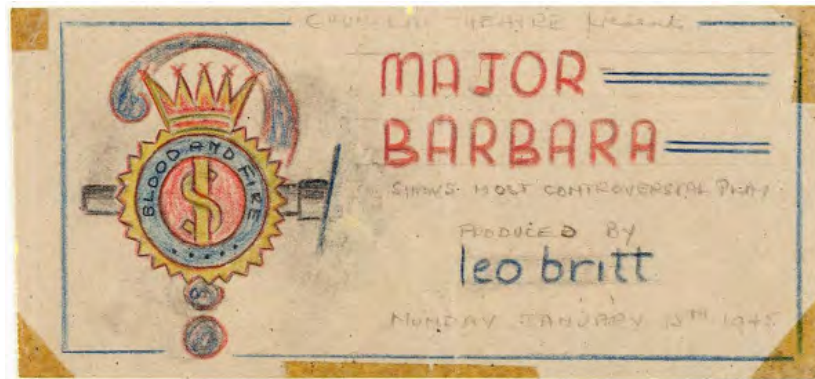


FIGURE 6.43. POSTER FOR *MAJOR BARBARA*. GEOFFREY GEE. IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

“[M]y brother [Douglas],” wrote Terry Morris, “gave a sterling performance in the title role. Undershaft was played by a peacetime schoolmaster ‘Schoolie’ Faulder. Again, a long wordy part quite excellently portrayed.”¹⁶⁷ Custance Baker “[played] Barbara’s younger sister, a girl of no importance.”¹⁶⁸

John Sharp thought the production “very good,” Aylwin was “enthralled,” but Richardson, super-critical as always, thought “Undershaft and the Greek Professor not right. An enjoyable entertainment but not correctly produced.”¹⁶⁹ Newcomers Jim Jacobs and Norman Carter were also in attendance. For Jacobs, “‘Major Barbara’ would have done credit to any of the smaller dramatic companies at Home.”¹⁷⁰ Attending his first Britt production, Carter was able to judge Britt’s talents as a producer-director for himself: “I got a back-row seat, which not only provided me with a quick getaway, but also the chance to test the theatre acoustics. Like Britt’s production of *Major Barbara*, both were perfect.”¹⁷¹

Norman Carter Meets Leo Britt

It was in this context that the Australian theatre producer-director Norman Carter found himself one day sitting in “the gods”—the seats at the top of the amphitheatre. Impressed with the care that had been taken to sculpt a steep bank into a rising tier of seats, he decided to investigate the stagehouse and its support spaces more closely.

Backstage, the professional touch was apparent. Everywhere there was evidence of expert theatrical knowledge, and in the centre of the scrupulously

swept stage was a baby grand piano. It looked real but inspection showed that it was a “prop” made of bamboo and reed matting, camouflaged with soot from the cookhouse.¹⁷²

He was inspecting the piano when Leo Britt appeared: “In spite of his patched shorts and hand-knitted blue woolen beret, there was no mistaking his profession.” When Carter introduced himself, Britt was not very welcoming: “‘Oh yes. . . . You’ve been putting on a few concerts at Tamarkan.’ Concerts! Resisting the urge to slap him down, I asked mildly if I could look over the theatre and again I got the suspicious glare.” Britt responded that he was too busy at the moment to show Carter around.¹⁷³ With a new producer in camp—one with professional credentials as well—Britt’s guard was up.

At this point “Schoolie” Faulder appeared and offered to show Carter the bamboo rehearsal space behind the theatre. With its overarching bamboo, Carter thought it resembled a cathedral:

I looked at the small table with its chair and the mound of whitewashed stones to mark the size and shape of the sets and show the placings of windows, doors and important furniture.^{xxxiii} Mr. Britt was doing a first-class job.

“Your producer is a perfectionist.”

“Yes, but he’s inclined to over-play his role of martinet. Sometimes I think he does it deliberately. You see, all theatre workers are officers, except Leo, but that makes no difference, nobody ‘pulls the pips’ and if he gets a little temperamental now and then, what the hell! This theatre has proved a godsend. I suppose you people have found the same.”

“Yes, we have.”

And with that exchange, Faulder and Carter parted company.¹⁷⁴

***Outward Bound* Goes into Rehearsal**

The following evening Britt came to Carter’s hut to inquire if he knew anything about Sutton Vane’s disturbing fantasy play *Outward Bound*, which would be his next production. Carter had stage-managed one production in Melbourne and played the leading role in a touring production. Since Britt had already cast the lead, he asked Carter if he would like to play “the poor old charlady,” Mrs. Midge. Carter accepted immediately.¹⁷⁵ When he walked into the rehearsal space the next morning, he was delighted when Britt asked him to use the white-washed stones to “show him the ‘set’ for the ship’s bar.”^{xxxiv}

Custance Baker thought *Outward Bound* a very odd choice for production in a POW camp:

The scene is aboard ship, in the saloon or bar of an ocean liner. There

^{xxxiii} It’s common practice in theatre to tape the floor of the rehearsal space with an outline of the settings so that the director and actors have some sense of the space relationships and actors know where they are to stand. Without the availability of tape or a wooden floor, Britt was repeating that process with white-washed stones on the ground.

^{xxxiv} Jacobs claimed Carter not only created an accurate ground plan of the single setting but recalled the entire text of the play from memory and really directed this show [Jacobs, 131].

is a mixed group of middle aged and elderly passengers none of whom appear to know one another. Endless conversations establishing characters, identities, and backgrounds until at last they begin to realize that they are all dead and that the ship is taking them to some unknown destination: hence the title.

Mixed in with this odd bunch are a young couple very much in love, referred to as “the half-ways.” They have little part in the play except to sit in corners kissing and embracing and murmuring love to one another.¹⁷⁶

The “half-ways”—played by Baker and Dick Lucas—were a failed suicide pact trapped on the tipping point between life and death.¹⁷⁷ Roused out of their stupor at the last minute by their dog’s barking, the young couple will themselves back into life, deciding that life, even with all its problems, is better than death.

Britt believed *Outward Bound* could speak to the POWs as a metaphor for their own condition. With a defeatist atmosphere about the end of the war pervading the camp, the play’s “message” about “willing oneself back into life” was one the POWs needed to hear.¹⁷⁸ But Baker wasn’t so sure the POWs were ready for a play about a group of deceased passengers sailing to “some unknown destination.”¹⁷⁹

Having to rehearse their “kiss and cuddle” scenes countless times, Baker and Lucas made a bold decision: “After a few dull rehearsals we decided to learn both parts and to play boy and girl on alternating nights”—which yielded hilarious unintended consequences.^{xxxv180}

Two One-Offs

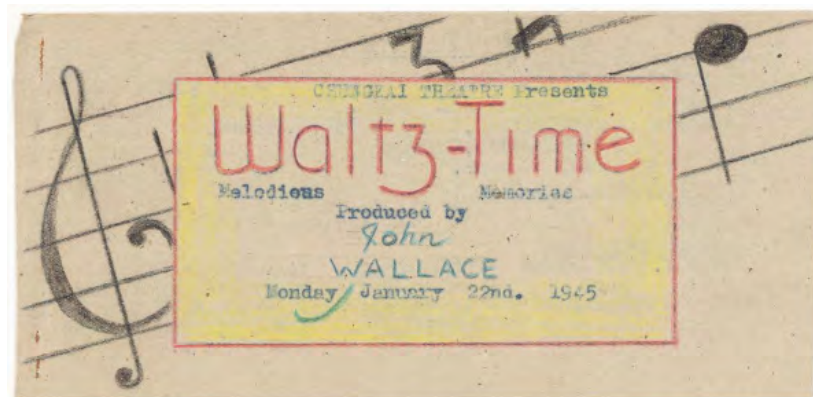


FIGURE 6.44. POSTER FOR *WALTZ TIME*. GEOFFREY GEE. IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

Inspired by the success of *On Your Toes*, a week after Britt’s *Major Barbara* closed John “Nellie” Wallace produced a dance show entitled *Waltz Time*.¹⁸¹ We know nothing of the playbill other than the climatic piece, a performance of Fokine’s 1911 ballet, “The Specter of the Rose” (*Le Spectre de la Rose*), created especially for the Russian dancer Vaslav Nijinsky. Who danced the two roles in this tour de force is not known, but with Philip Brugman’s return from up country, it’s possible he took Nijinsky’s role of “the

^{xxxv} See Chapter 12: “Jolly Good Show! for the unforeseen consequence of this decision.

specter” and Wallace that of the Young Girl who falls asleep and dreams she is dancing with a rose held in her hand.^{xxxvi}

When *Outward Bound*’s opening was postponed two days before it was supposed to open because two of its leads went into hospital with new bouts of malaria, Britt hastily pulled together a show so the stage would not be dark for a week.¹⁸² In *The Rhythm Club*, Britt was able to present “new discoveries, male and female,” which in this case meant some of the newly arrived Australian and Dutch/Indonesian performers from Tamarkan.¹⁸³ With the slim pool of Chungkai performers left in camp, these new entertainers would prove to be a great blessing. Baker was amazed at Britt’s ability to create a production out of whole cloth practically overnight.¹⁸⁴ To make sure there would be no mistaking it as a fully rehearsed Britt production, the show was billed as “A Short Notice Program.”

Camp Update: The Theatre Held Hostage

On 29 January Colonel Ishii ordered a new “Speedo” to make sure construction of the bund and moat around the camp were finished on schedule. With all POWs (including officers) required to work around the clock on night and day shifts, this order became the occasion for a new and concerted effort by the officers to reassert their rights under the Hague Conventions. But in his new role as Ishii’s adjutant, Kokubo resisted any change in the compromise that had been worked out in a similar situation back in June: “all fit Officers would be expected to work but . . . the I. J. A. would consider it to be voluntary.”¹⁸⁵ Kokubo threatened retaliation if the officers didn’t comply with that arrangement. The officers responded by going on strike. Kokubo countered that maneuver with one of his own: “He said it was unfortunate, but if the officers didn’t work exactly as before, but quite voluntarily, he’d have to close the theatre; and that would be bad luck on the O.R.’s, wouldn’t it?” The officers refused to be blackmailed, and the theatre was closed.¹⁸⁶

By closing the theatre and the canteen, Kokubo hoped to create dissension between the officers and the other ranks. When that didn’t work, he upped the ante by threatening to tear down the theatre. But that threat also proved ineffective. The other ranks stood fast with their officers against this blatant attempt at intimidation. In the meantime, the officers had written a letter of protest to General Sugazawa at I. J. A. POW Accommodation headquarters in Bangkok, and when his reply was received, Kokubo had lost the battle.

Pressing their advantage a bit further, the officers sought to reverse the order to tear down the theatre. A deputation led by theatre committee chair Bill Pycock went to Ishii to request that the theatre not be pulled down and, instead, be allowed to resume its operations. Ishii argued that “war time was not the time for merrymaking.” In the ensuing “discussion,” Ishii finally gave permission for theatre activities to resume, but face-saving concessions had to be made in order to gain his approval: “all props etc (including band instruments) are to be removed. Panel paintings of nude beauties (theatre décor) removed to barber’s shop.”¹⁸⁷

This is the first notice in any POW account that paintings of “nude beauties” adorned the proscenium’s side walls. They don’t appear in Fielding’s sketch (see **Figure 6.39**).

^{xxxvi} Later, in a new campaign of deprivation by the Japanese administration, the POW cemetery with its beautiful garden setting surrounded by a high bamboo fence would be declared out of bounds. But something of inestimable value was left untouched by this harassment policy: “A rose is blooming on the solitary rose bush, and is much frequented, smelling it having become a ceremony” [John Sharp, *Diary*, 7 February 1945]. POWs and Japanese alike were hungry for beauty. Wallace’s *Specter of the Rose* ballet could not have been more prescient.



FIGURE 6.45. "BED DOWN." FIGURE 6.46. "STRONG MEN NEEDED." TWO SKETCHES BY P. A. O. VAN VELTHUISEN. IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

Since Dutch artist P. A. O. Van Velthuisen was well-known in the camp for drawing "pinups," he may have been commissioned to produce the "nude beauties" flanking the stage.^{xxxvii}

Another and more important casualty of the theatre's closure was a Dutch/Indonesian production with a science fiction theme entitled *Mars Fantasia* (*Mars Fantasy*) that had been scheduled for early February.

^{xxxvii} These images of the female form may have not only been decorative but also functioned as visual aids to help audiences imaginatively superimpose their idealized representations onto the less than ideal bodies of the female impersonators.

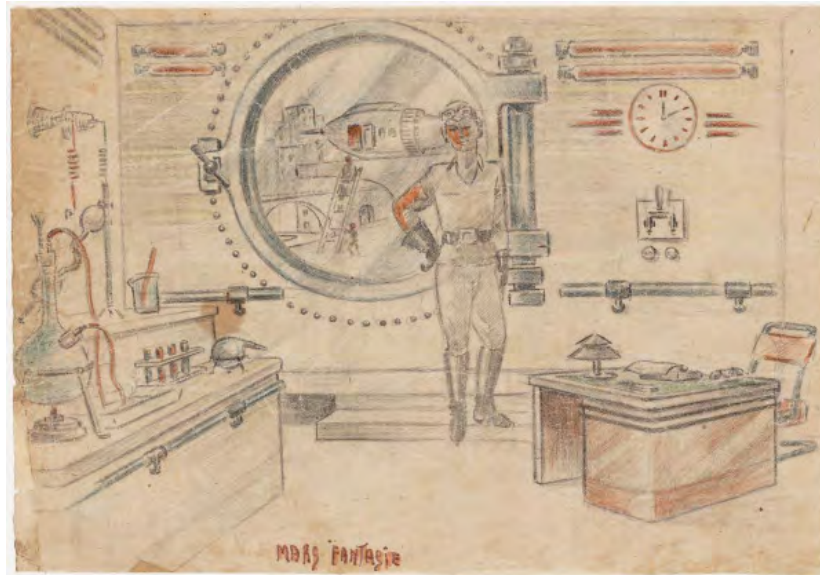


FIGURE 6.47. *MARS FANTASIE*. SET DESIGN BY HUIB VAN LAAR. IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

All that remains of this aborted production are an unfinished poster and Huib van Laar's and Franz Hans' renderings for the elaborate futuristic set designs executed in the style of the popular 1936 British science fiction film *Things To Come* (see **Figures 6.48–6.50** in the Image Gallery). Why this brilliantly designed show was never rescheduled is a mystery, but perhaps other events intervened.

Outward Bound

While hurriedly putting up *Rhythm Club*, Britt also rehearsed his cast of *Outward Bound* until Faulder and Potts were released from hospital. They were in dress rehearsals once again when Faulder arrived late one morning and announced that Ishii had decided to close the theatre—effective immediately—and that the officers would be sent to an all-officers camp at Kanburi. Dejected by the news, Britt and his actors left the bamboo rehearsal space.¹⁸⁸

A few of the Chungkai officers were not transferred to Kanburi: their skills were urgently needed at new airfield construction sites elsewhere in Thailand. Hugh de Wardener and Dudley Gotla were sent down to Kachu Mountain on the Kra Peninsula as medical officers along with Keith Neighbour and some other ranks that included Tom Boardman. And Leofric Thorpe was sent to the remote jungle camp at Nakhon Nai. By 17 February, all the officers in Chungkai except for Robert Hardie and a few other medical officers had been transferred to Kanburi.¹⁸⁹ With their departure, Regimental Sergeant Major Edkin was designated officer in charge of the POWs and Bandmaster Warrant Officer Neale installed as entertainment officer.

A Controversy about Entertainment

Once the officers had left, the theatre was allowed to reopen but only on the condition that Ishii's new guidelines both on the content of the shows and on audience behavior would be obeyed. "Each week a new order was given," wrote drummer Wally Davis, "until we finished up with no announcing, no singing,

no applause and a Japanese tune to be played in both halves.”¹⁹⁰ For the Japanese these restrictions were a “no words” order meant to prevent the entertainers from passing covert messages about the war’s status to their audiences. In response, Bainbridge and Samethini tried to subvert the censorship by inserting “odd bars of British and Dutch patriotic tunes” in the music the Swingtette played.¹⁹¹

In a further attempt to scuttle the entertainment, Ishii ordered that no rehearsals could take place. This time he nearly succeeded. According to Davis, the restrictions “caused controversy amongst POWs as to whether to continue with the concerts or not. Some thought to continue looked as though we were Jap-happy, others thought to stop altogether was just what the Japs wanted.”¹⁹²

This report is the first of any internal disagreement among the POWs about the role and value of their entertainment, although there must always have been an undercurrent of opposition to these shows for the very reason given above. These objections were answered by the obvious salutary effect entertainment had on the morale and health of the troops and by the belief that its continuance was more important to their survival than what could possibly be seen as collaboration with the enemy. And once again, these arguments won the day.

Exeunt

The overcrowding, poor rations, constant state of flux, and ever-tightening restrictions on camp life encouraged POWs like John Sharp, Laurie Allison, and Tom Boardman to volunteer for redeployment to a new airfield construction site at Kachu Mountain south of Ban Pong on the Kra Peninsula.¹⁹³ Some reasoned that Kachu Mountain would place them closer to the location of the expected Allied invasion of Thailand when it took place and, therefore, closer to their liberation.

Ishii’s restrictions on theatre—as well as the argument among the POWs over the value of their entertainment—led Leo Britt to announce he was leaving Chungkai for Kachu Mountain as well. Gee was puzzled by Britt’s decision: “No doubt hoping for fresh fields to conquer but I can’t see there being any theatre down there—Heaven knows there’s nothing much doing here with a well-established theatre.”¹⁹⁴

But when Pat Fox, Jim Anderson, Val Middleton, G. L. Galyean, A. B. Luff, band conductor Tony Gerrish, and other former members of the Tamarkan Players decided to go as well, it was clear that plans were afoot to start a new concert party at Kachu Mountain, one not hampered by Ishii’s constraints. This group’s sudden departure in early March was a huge loss to the entertainment world at Chungkai.

4. “We Are Invincible!”

With Britt’s departure, Eddie Edwins, Bill Bainbridge, and Joop Postma appeared to be the only entertainment producers left in camp. But members of the Tamarkan Players who had not left with Britt were not to be discounted. On 22 March, Gee attended a “little informal show in the Surgical Ward” compèred by Ron Wells and starring Wally McQueen and the Ockerse Brothers trio. He thought it a “grand concert!”¹⁹⁵

This ward concert was the beginning of a newly formed Australian-British concert party led by Wells and McQueen. On 26 March, they remounted a production of *The Wedding of the Painted Doll* (originally produced at Tamarkan back in August) for the whole camp. Gee thought it “a very scrappy effort” and was particularly taken with a Hawaiian scene: “(excellent décor by Digger Frank Bridges [sic]) featuring Eurasian Dutch, the Johnny Ockerse trio etc.”¹⁹⁶

On 2 April, Postma presented *Joop Lacht Weer* (*Joop Laughs Again*)—his first show since

returning from his up country maintenance party. It had been originally scheduled for 21 March but was postponed because the ashes of dead Japanese soldiers killed in the Allied offensive in Burma had been brought down the line and kept temporarily in the camp.¹⁹⁷



FIGURE 6.51. PROGRAM COVER FOR *JOOP LACHT WEER*. GEOFFREY GEE. IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

To prove to Chungkai audiences they could do just as well as Britt and the others in producing a show, Postma laid on all the production values he could: sets by Uiterwijk, décor by Baart, lighting by Waller, costumes by Jimmy Olds and Puck Jonkmans, and wigs by Jansen.¹⁹⁸

A Hollywood Ending

On 12 April, Gee was enlisted to help create the décor for the next show—an Australian-British-Dutch co-production entitled *Hollywood Interlude*.¹⁹⁹ After watching a dress rehearsal two days later, he wrote, “It looks as if it will ring the bell and be a success.”²⁰⁰

The revue was structured around a series of parodies of well-known Hollywood films, such as “*Bengal Lancers*, *Tarzan*, *Roman Scandals*,” and film types, such as “*a Desert Scene*, *Cowboy Scene*,” ending with a “star-studded ‘Brown Derby’ finale” that included a Laurel and Hardy sketch.²⁰¹ When *Hollywood Interlude* opened on 16 April, it didn’t just “ring the bell”—it raised an alarm!

The Incident Report

Like the *Thai Diddle Diddle* debacle, accounts of what actually happened to put the future of the theatre and its activities in jeopardy differ. In his diary, Gee summarized the opening night’s performance and the disruption that occurred:

Show began—got off to a splendid start—“Hollywood gate”—“Bengal Lancers”—“Tarzan” (big success for Wally McQueen and Ron Wells) when Nip

interpreter came on the scene, slapped the three characters front curtain and stopped the show saying “Since when are you allowed to speak on the stage.” He went backstage, said “I shall dismantle the theatre tomorrow.” To be no speaking or costumes—so under difficulties the Swingtette adjusted themselves and within a few minutes an improvised show was under way. . . . It was a fine success and a big moral victory. The audience lapped it up.²⁰²

Wally Davis, who was in the Swingtette, described what he could remember of the offending sketch: “During the Tarzan Scene, Dorothy Lamour and Bing Crosby were singing a love song together when Wally Mcween [McQueen] an Australian dressed like a monkey swung down from the rafters, jumped up and down each time he kissed Bing, who sung louder because he thought it was Dorothy. The audience roared.”^{xxxviii203}

But it was cast member Philip Brugman who identified the exact nature of the offense:

For the monkey they used a short Scot, and the costume was so real except for the face with slanted eyes, so that the figure appeared like a monkey with a Jap face. (They had done this on purpose, of course.)

And when this “monkey” also uttered some Japanese shrieks, the fat was in the fire. A Japanese officer jumped on the stage and started using many swear words that nobody understood. Only his gestures were significant. The play had to stop, but the “monkey” carried on, making faces at the Jap, whereupon he pulled his sword in rage. He tried to hit the “monkey” who was too fast for him. The furious Jap, with pulled sword running after the monkey, was such a comical sight that the whole audience was dying of laughter, you can imagine. At long last more Japs got on stage and captured the poor “monkey” who was then dragged to the guard house where he got a beating.²⁰⁴

After the show Gee went backstage to see how the performers were faring: “[A]ll disappointed in the ‘Hollywood Interval’ [*sic* Interlude] had been going so well but spirits high and all pleased at way a good entertainment had been resurrected from the debris. Some hopeful of producing it again soon, some doubtful if any more shows but Amazing British spirit soaring high and we can only wait to see what it will come of it all.”^{xxxix205}

The performers were greatly puzzled by what had happened. They had typed off and submitted the script to Ishikura, the Japanese interpreter—nicknamed “Turtleneck”—for his approval as required, and it had been returned without comment and stamped with his seal.²⁰⁶ To them his seal meant they had permission to produce the revue as submitted. What they didn’t realize is that Ishikura thought it quite clear that no words could be used during a performance and, therefore, hadn’t bothered to look at the script. No one could recall when costumes had been banned.

With no Bill Pycok in their midst to negotiate a less drastic outcome, there was great concern that

^{xxxviii} This was the monkey act McQueen had originally performed in “jungle shows” in Burma (see Chapter 4: *The Interval*).

^{xxxix} Gee actually wrote “interval” here, but given his observations about the show’s conclusion, the word choice doesn’t make sense.

this time the threat to tear down the theatre would be carried out. Gee voiced the fears of many:

What a tragedy if our theatre days are over—and as I see it, apart from an occasional band show it wouldn't be worth carrying on if costumes, décor, make-up etc. are all banned. The glory of Chungkai theatre may have tonight blazed itself out. . . . The show was going to be a wow. It would have most certainly rung the bell. . . . The pity of it! I'm awaiting eagerly to see what develops from the sad situation.²⁰⁷

The Outcome

The next day a conference in Ishii's office was attended by POW commander R.S.M. Edkin, bandmaster Neale (officer in charge of the theatre), their interpreter, and the Dutch officer Cor Punt.^{xl} Conflicting rumors about the conference and its outcome flew around the camp:

By mid-morning it seemed that things were going well and that last night's issue wasn't so dramatic after all. We felt certain that there was no longer any question of the theatre coming down—the Nips had complained of the Interpreter's intervention and he had more or less found himself in the wrong. Shows would continue as per usual and in the afternoon there was even rumour that "Hollywood Interlude" would go on tonight! Ron and Wally were all set for a quick favourable verdict if it should be forthcoming, so that all preparations would be ready for such an eventuality!

But, at 4 o'clock, bandmaster Neale (W.O. i/c theatre but useless) arrived there with a working party and began to demolish same. The Nip i/c said a new one was to be built and so Bill Bainbridge went along to H.Q. and he and Camp Commandant Edkin had an interview with some higher-up Nip who informed them of the sad news that the theatre would NOT be re-built and that concerts were finished. Nevertheless during the evening there was rumour of occasional band shows to be permitted with a mixture of European and Nippon music! We shall see.²⁰⁸

The Chungkai theatre wasn't just pulled down—large sections of it were burnt to the ground. "It was almost heart-breaking," Gee wrote, "for those of us who love the theatre and were wrapped up in its life here."²⁰⁹

Anticipating just such an outcome, that morning,

Jimmy Old and gang, Lee Coombe, etc. rescued the entire wardrobe and working tools etc. so that the great job of acquisition has not been completely undone, tho' stage props, wings, flie's [grid?], screens, etc. have all been burned.

^{xl} Wim Kan's close friend who had been in Tamarkan as N.E.I. adjutant.

Naturally it had taken a long time to acquire the many props etc. and get the theatre into such an adaptable position—it adds to the tragedy but it is good that most of the stuff has been salvaged, tho' I doubt if we're ever going to have the opportunity of using them again. . . .

And so a grand show "Hollywood Interlude" was ruined and Bill Bainbridge's big band show completely upset. The Dutch show, too, which was just getting into rehearsal, has now had it. Poor Ron, poor Bill and poor Joop.²¹⁰

Among those who watched the theatre's demolition were Philip Brugman and Joop Postma. "I remember clearly," Brugman recalled, "that Joop Postma and I looked at the fire with tears in our eyes . . . two and a half years of work gone, just because of revenge. . . . You can understand our feelings towards the yellow barbarians."²¹¹

For Gee, the sad historic occasion called for a eulogy:

And so a sorry end to our splendid theatre which has been the scene of so many big successes. Who could ever forget "Wonder Bar," "Night Must Fall," "Youth at the Helm," "Von Lach tot Lach" etc.? Or the grand fun to be had mixing with the many personalities who have contributed so much to the entertainment of this camp—of the little thrill to be got from painting scenery or helping in some way to give the shows that high standard that prevailed. . . . It's a sad sad business indeed and many of us were there to witness, for a while, its destruction but it wasn't much fun really, tho' we made light of it. These Nips can't possibly break our spirit (now as high as ever it was) no matter how hard they try or how much they do to us. We are invincible!²¹²

"You Can't Keep These Show Folks Down"

But the plucky entertainers at Chungkai were not to be so easily defeated. They were not going to disappoint the troops, especially those in hospital, who depended on their performances to keep morale high. Later that evening, Gee attended a little concert in the hospital's surgical ward: "You can't keep these show folks down," he exulted. "Ron Wells, Wally McQueen, Johnny & Alfonse Ochkerse [*sic*], Mike Sands etc."²¹³

Since the stagehouse was a large structure, its demolition took time. By the next day, 18 April, everything had been destroyed but the roof and its support posts. Gee was struck by "how deserted the place looks." That night he attended another concert in the surgical ward—"a happy evening with this infectiously gay gang"—and spoke with Ron Wells, who was optimistic "that we shall have entertainment again soon, having heard rumour of the departure soon of Ishi [Ishii] and the interpreter, but there's too much wishful thinking to that and I'm sure it's an extremely unlikely probably [probability?]. 'We've had it!'"²¹⁴

When Gee went to the theatre site two day later, the demolition was complete. Adding to his

concern about the future of musical entertainment in the camp, Gee learned that Bill Bainbridge, instead of working on orchestrations for new shows as was his usual practice, was out on a working party.²¹⁵

The rumor concerning Lieutenant-Colonel Ishii proved accurate. He was promoted to full colonel and left Chungkai for Bangkok. The POWs were glad to see the back of him, “tho’ it’s too late, I guess,” Gee reflected, “now that we’ve lost our theatre.”²¹⁶ But with the music-loving Kokubo back in charge, the ban on entertainment for the whole camp might change.

On 23 April when Commandant Edkin received his orders for the day, he was puzzled to find that the evening *tenko* was scheduled for 7 p.m. When he asked why the time change he was told, “It’s a show night, isn’t it?” whereupon Cadder Parfitt was called in and got a band show together for an 8 o’clock concert.” Unfortunately, at performance time, it was drizzling. The entertainers asked if the concert could be postponed and were told no—but that it could be held in one of the hospital wards instead, with the proviso that only patients could attend. So the band held their concert in Gee’s malaria ward, and there “were hundreds in the audience who weren’t patients!”²¹⁷

“What a strange and ludicrous position the Nips have put us in,” Gee mused. “They pull down our theatre and then say you can have a show!”²¹⁸ Though time for rehearsal became “practically nil,” weekly band concerts resumed.²¹⁹

“We’ve Had It!”

To ensure that only band shows would be produced, Joop Postma, Philip Brugman, Wally McQueen, and other members of the offending Australian-British-Dutch concert party were sent down to Tamuang. There, the troupe eventually performed once again, and those who got bashed up following the *Hollywood Interlude* incident would get their own back on Ishikura and his kind.^{xii}

At some point, the Swingtette sought and received permission to build a new theatre on the same site as the old one. It was not a proscenium theatre but one of the old open-air platform stages with woven mats at the back and sides to act as sounding boards. Gee was asked to create décor for the weekly shows.²²⁰

By the end of May, Medical Officer Robert Hardie voiced concern about the state of the returning maintenance parties: “Desperately sick men continue to arrive here from up-country camps—the usual complaints, ulcers, vitamin deficiency, constant malaria, severe anaemia. New parties are formed from time to time to go up to replace these men sent down.”²²¹

Geoffrey Gee and Huib van Laar were two of those replacements. On 10 June, Gee was sent up the line to Linson Camp/203 Kilo on a wood-cutting party; van Laar to Kran Krai/250 Kilo. With Gee’s departure, we lose his detailed account of the final days of entertainment in Chungkai. Drummer Wally Davis picks up the story.

In June another wave of paranoia engulfed the Japanese. This time they claimed the entertainers were communicating covert messages about the war through the titles of their selections, and public performances were temporarily banned once again. “We continued for a while,” Davis wrote, “but as Bill [Bainbridge] kept getting bashed up before we could find the interpreter to explain such things as ‘Tale[s] of Hoffman,’ or ‘Vienna Woods,’ but finished up by just the ‘Swingtette’ going round the Hospital Huts.”²²²

When the Japanese banned prisoners from gathering in groups outside the hospital huts to listen to the concerts, another heated debate “causing almost fights” took place between the POWs who were in favor of continuing the entertainment and those who were not.²²³ This time the arguments “against” won the day and no further concert parties at Chungkai took place.

^{xli} See Chapter 11: “Precious Personalities.”

In late June, the I. J. A. decided to close the camp and the Swingtette musicians rejoined Joop Postma, Ron Wells, and the other entertainers at the relocation camp at Tamuang. By the first of July, Chungkai was abandoned to the jungle—and “to the chattering birds and the flying tree rats.”²²⁴

Endnotes

- 1 Richard Sharp, 53.
- 2 Coast, 181.
- 3 Gotla, Letter, 8 July 2001.
- 4 John Sharp, 3 June 1944.
- 5 Coast, 181.
- 6 John Sharp, 29 May 1944.
- 7 Coast, 181–182.
- 8 Coast, 181; Peacock, 225.
- 9 Richardson, “Memories Bittersweet,” 165.
- 10 Durnford, 145–147; Richardson, Memoir, 165.
- 11 Durnford, 147.
- 12 John Sharp, 29 May 1944.
- 13 Smith, 121–122.
- 14 Coast, 181.
- 15 De Wardener, Interview, 21.
- 16 De Wardener, Interview, 21.
- 17 De Wardener, Additions from his vetting of the chapter, 19, 20 March and 15 August 2011; 8 April 2012.
- 18 Coast, 181.
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- 20 Hardie, 28 May 1944.
- 21 Gee, Diary, 27 May 1944.
- 22 Davis, n.p.
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- 24 Richard Sharp, 52.
- 25 John Sharp, 27 May 1944.
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- 27 Tom Boardman, Interview, 57.
- 28 Tom Boardman, Questionnaire, 3–4.
- 29 John Sharp, 5 June 1944.
- 30 Richardson, Diary, 5 June 1944.
- 31 John Sharp, Diary, 6 June 1944; Gee, Diary, 5 June 1944.
- 32 Owtram, 104–105.
- 33 John Sharp, 6 June 1944.
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- 37 Gee, Diary, 8 June 1944.
- 38 Gee, Diary, 5 June 1944.
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- 40 Allison, *Begone Dull Care*, 101.
- 41 Richard Sharp, 53–54.
- 42 Gee, Diary, 13 June 1944.
- 43 Richardson, Diary, 16 June 1944.
- 44 John Sharp, Diary, 19 June 1944.

- 45 John Sharp, Diary, 20 June 1944.
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- 47 Gee, Diary, 19 June 1944.
- 48 Hardie, Diary, 26 June 1944.
- 49 Gee, Diary, 23 June 1944.
- 50 Coast, 182.
- 51 De Wardener, Interview, 26–30.
- 52 Coast, 182.
- 53 Tom Boardman, Interview, 42.
- 54 Chippington, 401.
- 55 De Wardener, Interview, 46.
- 56 Owtram, 105.
- 57 Gotla, Letter, 6 March 2001.
- 58 Coast, 182.
- 59 Richard Sharp, 53.
- 60 Coast, 182.
- 61 Gee, Diary, 7 July 1944.
- 62 Coast, 185–186.
- 63 Coast, 186.
- 64 Coast, 186–187.
- 65 Richardson, Diary, 15 July 1944.
- 66 John Sharp, Diary, 20 June 1944.
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- 68 John Sharp, Diary, 28 June 1944.
- 69 Marsh, Diary, 22 July 1944.
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- 71 Richardson, Diary, 22 July 1944.
- 72 John Sharp, Diary, 26–28 July 1944.
- 73 Johnston, 113.
- 74 Coast, 200.
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- 80 Thorpe, Letters, 26, 29 September 2002.
- 81 Richardson, Diary, 19 August 1944; Marsh, Diary, 4 October 1944.
- 82 John Sharp, Diary, 27 August 1944.
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- 86 Coast, 192–193.
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- 88 Richardson, Diary, 1 September 1944; Tom Boardman, Interview, 47.
- 89 Terry Morris, Self-Interview #1, 5.
- 90 Richardson, Diary, 8 September 1944.
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- 92 Coast, 193–194.
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- 96 John Sharp, Diary, 24 September 1944.
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- 98 Baker, "Extracts from 'A Memoir,'" 12.
- 99 Richard Sharp, 53.
- 100 Thorpe, Letter to Allison, 21 February 1988.
- 101 Thorpe, Letter, 26 September 2002.
- 102 Gee, Diary, 30 September 1944; see also Richardson, Diary, 30 September 1944.
- 103 Gee, Diary, 3 October 1944.
- 104 Gee, Diary, 4 October 1944.
- 105 John Sharp, Diary, 6 October 1944.
- 106 Coast, 183.
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- 109 Baker, "Extracts from 'A Memoir,'" 5.
- 110 Coast, 184.
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- 113 Coast, 183.
- 114 Gee, Diary, 8 October 1944.
- 115 Gee, Diary, 9 October 1944.
- 116 Coast, 183.
- 117 Gee, Diary, 20 October 1944.
- 118 Gee, Diary, 28 October 1944.
- 119 Gee, Diary, 28 October 1944; see also Gee's poster for the show.
- 120 Gee, Diary, 10 October 1944.
- 121 Davis, n.p.
- 122 Coast, 183.
- 123 Gee, Diary, 28 October 1944.
- 124 Gee, Diary, 4 November 1944.
- 125 Gee, Diary, 4 November 1944.
- 126 Gee, Diary, 5 November 1944.
- 127 John Sharp, Diary, 14, 20 October 1944.
- 128 Gee, Diary, 10 November 1944.
- 129 Richardson, Diary, 11 November 1944.
- 130 Gee, Diary, 10 November 1944.
- 131 Gee, Diary, 17 November 1944.
- 132 Gee, Diary, 17 November 1944.
- 133 Coast, 184–185.
- 134 Marsh, Diary, 30 November 1944.
- 135 Richardson, Diary, 24 November 1944.
- 136 Marsh, Diary, 30 November 1944.
- 137 Marsh, Diary, 30 November 1944.
- 138 Marsh, Diary, 21 December 1944.
- 139 Baker, "Extracts from 'A Memoir,'" 14.
- 140 Baker, "Extracts from 'A Memoir,'" 14.
- 141 Richardson, Diary, 18 December 1944.
- 142 Jacobs, 126.
- 143 Baker, "Extracts from 'A Memoir,'" 15.
- 144 Richard Sharp, 60.
- 145 Baker, "Extracts from 'A Memoir,'" 16.
- 146 Jacobs, 129.

- 147 Peacock, 231.
- 148 Richard Sharp, 60.
- 149 Richardson, Diary, 25 December 1944.
- 150 Coast, 185.
- 151 Owtram, 106–107.
- 152 Owtram, 107.
- 153 Owtram, 108.
- 154 Baker, “Extracts from ‘A Memoir,’” 14.
- 155 Baker, “Extracts from ‘A Memoir,’” 14.
- 156 John Sharp, Diary, 5 January 1945.
- 157 Hardie, Diary, 5 January 1945.
- 158 Coast, 207.
- 159 Hardie, 155.
- 160 Coast, 208.
- 161 Coast, 185.
- 162 Peacock, 231.
- 163 Richardson, Diary, 17–31 December 1944.
- 164 Gee, Diary, 12 January 1945.
- 165 Boardman, Interview, 49.
- 166 London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1947.
- 167 Morris, Letter, 20 November 2000.
- 168 Baker, “Extracts from ‘A Memoir,’” 14.
- 169 John Sharp, Diary, 15 January 1945; Aylwin, 1945 Folder, 3; Richardson, Diary, 15 January 1945.
- 170 Jacobs, 131.
- 171 Carter, 182.
- 172 Carter, 179.
- 173 Carter, 180.
- 174 Carter, 179–181.
- 175 Carter, 182.
- 176 Baker, “Extracts from ‘A Memoir,’” 17–18.
- 177 Baker, “Extracts from ‘A Memoir,’” 18.
- 178 Baker, “Extracts from ‘A Memoir,’” 17.
- 179 Baker, “Extracts from ‘A Memoir,’” 17.
- 180 Baker, “Extracts from ‘A Memoir,’” 18.
- 181 John Sharp, 22 January 1945.
- 182 Gee, Diary, 27, 29 January 1945.
- 183 Gee, Diary, 29 January 1945.
- 184 Baker, “Extracts from ‘A Memoir,’” 13.
- 185 Richardson, Diary, 14 June 1944.
- 186 Coast, 208.
- 187 John Sharp, 1 February 1945.
- 188 Carter, 182–183.
- 189 John Sharp, Diary, 17 February 1945.
- 190 Davis, n.p.
- 191 Davis, n.p.
- 192 Davis, n.p.
- 193 John Sharp, Diary, 21 February 1945.
- 194 Gee, Diary, 5 March 1945.
- 195 Gee, Diary, 22 March 1945.
- 196 Gee, Diary, 26 March 1945.
- 197 Gee, Diary, 2 April 1945.

- 198 Gee, Program cover, trans. Margie Bellamy.
- 199 Gee, Diary, 12-14 April, 1945.
- 200 Gee, Diary, 14 April 1945.
- 201 Davis, Scrapbook, Box #6, "Band Programme of last full concert," n.p.; Gee, Diary, 16 April 1945.
- 202 Gee, Diary, 16 April 1945.
- 203 Davis, Scrapbook, Box #6, handwritten note at bottom of "Band Programme," n.p.
- 204 Leffelaar and van Witsen, 256; trans. by Sheri Tromp.
- 205 Gee, Diary, 16 April 1945.
- 206 Gee, Diary, 16 April 1945.
- 207 Gee, Diary, 16 April 1945.
- 208 Gee, Diary, 17 April 1945.
- 209 Gee, Diary, 17 April 1945.
- 210 Gee, Diary, 17 April 1945.
- 211 Leffelaar and van Witsen, 253, 256; trans. by Sheri Tromp.
- 212 Gee, Diary, 17 April 1945.
- 213 Gee, Diary, 17 April 1945.
- 214 Gee, Diary, 18 April 1945.
- 215 Gee, Diary, 20 April 1945.
- 216 Gee, Diary, 21 April 1945.
- 217 Gee, Diary, 23 April 1945.
- 218 Gee, Diary, 23 April 1945.
- 219 Gee, Diary, 29 April 1945.
- 220 Gee, Diary, 14, 28 May 1945.
- 221 Hardie, 169.
- 222 Davis, n.p.
- 223 Davis, n.p.
- 224 Gimson, Diary, 18 February 1944.

Chapter 7: “The Show Must Go On”

Nong Pladuk Relocation Camp

When Lieutenant-Colonel Philip Toosey and his troops arrived in Nong Pladuk from Tamarkan on 11 December 1943, they found that there were actually two camps at the site: “The ground layout was P.O.W. No. 1 contiguous with the Rly. sidings and W/shops, P.O.W. No. 2 contiguous with the A. A. [Anti-Aircraft] position.”¹ British, Australian, and American POWs were billeted in Camp No. 1, where Sergeant Watanabe was the I. J. A. NCO Administrator; Netherlands East Indies POWs were placed in Camp No. 2 with Sergeant-Major Saito in charge.² Communication between the two camps was strictly forbidden.

Colonel Toosey’s arrival coincided with that of Major Ebiko as the new I. J. A. Group Commandant for Group VI.³ Toosey called Ebiko “the most sincere and tolerant Gp. Cmd. in Thailand.”⁴ Under Major Ebiko, life in Nong Pladuk became less restrictive, and through the intercession of Sergeant Watanabe, the POWs in Camp No. 1 were allowed to build a theatre and produce weekly shows.⁵

Backstory

Nong Pladuk, situated just east of the transit camp at Ban Pong, had been the starting point for the Thai end of the Thailand-Burma railway. Built during the summer of 1942 by an advance party of POWs from Singapore, it was located in former paddy fields and banana plantations alongside the Bangkok-Malaya Railway line, at the junction where the new line to Burma would be built. It functioned as the supply depot and marshaling yard for the railway and was also the site of the Hashimoto Engineering Workshops, a maintenance facility—all of which made it a prime strategic target for Allied bombing raids. As in other places, the Japanese had refused to do anything to identify the site as a POW camp that might protect it from these attacks.

During 1942 and 1943, entertainment in Nong Pladuk had taken place only sporadically at best. For Christmas 1942 there had been a show in which “Ace” Connolly and his “Kings of Swing” orchestra performed at one end of a Japanese hut nicknamed “the Old Grotto.”⁶ (Connolly, a trumpeter, and his orchestra had been part of the P.O.W. WOWS concert party in Changi POW Camp.) Following the show’s closing moments, the audience, as had happened back in Changi a month earlier during “the Selarang Incident,” demanded the singing of “God Save the King,” forbidden by the Japanese. “Two thousand lusty voices took it up spontaneously,” reported G. F. Kershaw, “despite the screamed obscenities of our Japanese audience. The louder they yelled the louder we sang. Rifle butts, feet and fists were generously used by the Imperial Japanese Army, but we sang it through fortissimo to the last word. Wonderful.”⁷

But as Kershaw had to admit, their outburst “rather prejudiced a possible repeat” of the concert, and it must have been a while before any other entertainment was permitted.⁸ During 1943 the fledgling concert party continued to attract other performers and production staff. Norman Pritchard, stage manager for several of the Optimists concert party shows in Changi and who had been retained in Nong Pladuk since late 1942 suffering from a knee injury, became associated with the troupe. By early June 1943, a new group of entertainers arrived from Chungkai, led by the former Keppel Harbour concert party producer Lieutenant John D. V. Allum. Allum persuaded the POW commandant to release his group from further work on the railway so they could join the concert party.⁹ⁱ

Although monsoon rains and the demands of “the Speedo” prevented entertainment activity, once

ⁱ They had arrived in Chungkai hospital camp at the end of May and put on several shows.

the two sides of the railway were joined in October 1943, there must have been some occasions when concert parties were allowed but no records of such have survived. Now that they had received permission to build a theatre and produce weekly shows, the entertainers immediately started planning a pantomime for their Christmas celebrations.¹⁰

A Christmas Panto

The pantomime chosen for the POWs' Christmas entertainment was the old favorite *Cinderella*, selected because of its metaphorical implications that spoke to the plight and the hope of the POWs. It was written and produced, this time, by Lieutenant Allum.



FIGURE 7.1. SOUVENIR PROGRAM FOR *CINDERELLA* BY WILLIAM WILDER. COURTESY OF ANTHONY WILDER.

William Wilder's program cover for *Cinderella* shows the Prince bowing to Cinderella below the pantomime's title. Above is the name of the new theatre, "The Prince of Wales"—its bold white lettering lit up against a dark pink background.ⁱⁱ As one POW explained, the prisoners' attempt to use this same name on the new theatre's proscenium arch failed: "we called [it the] Prince Of Wales Theatre hoping that the initial letters, which we made as prominent and conspicuous as possible, would be read by aircraft as Prisoner Of War Thailand. But an artful Japanese officer, who spoke English, saw the significance of this and made us take the name down."¹¹

ⁱⁱ William Wilder was an artist, like Jack Chalker and others, who set out to document the lives of the POWs. Besides his sketches of life on the railway and in Nong Pladuk, he produced souvenir programs for sale to the audience and cast members.



FIGURE 7.2. PLAYBILL FOR *CINDERELLA*. WILLIAM WILDER. COURTESY OF ANTHONY WILDER.

The playbill for *Cinderella* reveals a large cast of twenty-three players, including five officers, plus musicians and production staff. Dance routines were choreographed by Ben Diamond, Sergeant Phil Hutt was responsible for the costumes, and a crew of eight technicians, including a Sergeant “Tich” Harrison, produced the props. “Ace” Connolly and Bob Gale are credited with the music, which was played by the Kings of Swing orchestra, although at the moment, Connolly’s “orchestra” consisted of only three musicians: its fourth member, saxophonist Gale, was in hospital.

One of the original songs Bob Gale wrote for the show from his hospital bed was “She Told Me,” with this chorus:

*Oh she told me the day that I sailed away,
 That she would never go astray, she told me.
 She told me that she would always be true,
 And never do a naughty thing if I promised to [too].
 Then she told me there would be lovely days
 If I'd been the goody-goody I had promised to be.¹²*

The lyrics reflect the stereotypical fears that “a girl” voices about her sweetheart’s behavior away from home. But Gale’s final verse (given below) has an unexpected twist that reveals the anxiety that also existed for the POWs, who worried whether their wives or sweethearts had remained faithful to them or had taken up with someone else—perhaps one of those American servicemen who had poured into England in preparation for D-Day and who, in the POWs’ imaginations, were believed to be sex maniacs.¹³

*I've got a letter from my girl who's waiting at home,
 She said it's time I settled down, it's silly to roam.
 I've written back to say I'll hurry when I can,
 Provided she can prove she's been with no other man.¹⁴*

In addition to the many new songs written for Nong Pladuk shows, Gale would extend his abilities as composer and lyricist to the creation of original revues and musical comedies—and, as a playwright, to short dramatic works. Bob Gale became one of the most creative and prolific artists on the Thailand-Burma railway.

Charles Steel, who was in charge of the P.R.I. Canteen in Nong Pladuk, thought the panto had “some fine ‘women’ for the female leads” —a comment that can only refer to Paul Phythian (Cinderella) and Basil Ferron (Fairy Queen) and not to Edward Ingram, who played the outrageous “Pantomime Dame.”¹⁵ (Ingram had previously been producer of the Bam-Booz-Lers concert party in Chungkai.)

It may have been the panto's beneficial effects on morale that prompted Major Ebiko to allow the POWs to form a permanent concert party with Lieutenant Allum as officer in charge. From the captors' point of view, the boredom and apathy conditioned by confinement could be deleterious to the prisoners' usefulness on maintenance parties and other work details, such as construction of the mammoth hospital camp for chronic cases nearby at Nakhon Pathom.

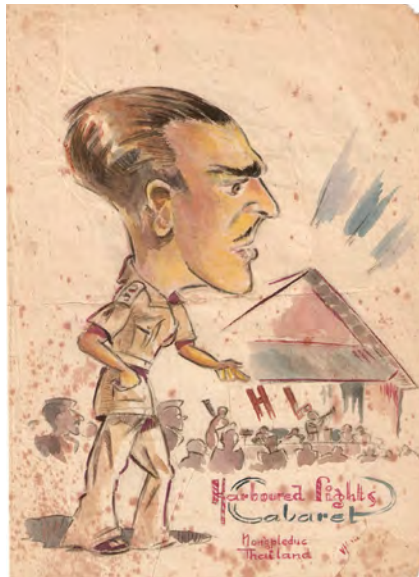


FIGURE 7.3. CARICATURE OF JOHN D. V. ALLUM. JAN VAN HOLTHE. COURTESY OF EVE ALLUM.

Nong Pladuk's New Theatre

The theatre in the background of Jan van Holthe's caricature of Allum is Nong Pladuk's first theatre—a pitched roof proscenium theatre sitting on a raised mound of earth. The front curtain has the concert party's new logo painted on it. Because of the ban on lighting due to the fear of bombing raids, it's possible that the roof had a large hinged flap that could be propped open to allow the sun to light the upstage areas. Afternoon shows given in the blazing sun might deter some POWs from attending, but the performers would never lack for an appreciative audience.¹⁵ Band leader and trumpet player "Ace" Connolly, along with other members of his band, visible in the orchestra pit.

Under Lieutenant Allum's skillful leadership, Nong Pladuk's concert party became a vibrant organization, producing show after show of original works that would be a continuing delight to the their audiences and a constant challenge to the performers' imaginations and ingenuities. Many of the men listed in the credits for *Cinderella* became core members of this entertainment unit. As it grew in size, one of its unique features will be its inclusion of former members of several different concert parties that had operated in the Changi/Singapore camps before being sent Up Country. Another unique feature will be the number of original plays and musicals generated by this company to make sure the shows continued.

"The Harboured Lights"

On 13 January 1944, "The Harboured Lights Concert Party" appeared for the first time with *Radio Guest Night*, produced and directed by Allum. The name was not only a reference to Allum's earlier concert party in Keppel Harbour ("The Harbour Lights") but also a pun on the men's prisoner status. (Unless otherwise noted, the Harboured Lights will produce, and Allum will direct, all the shows in Camp No. 1.)

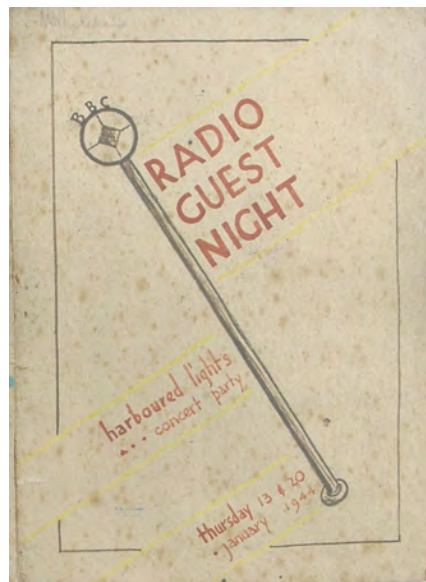


FIGURE 7.4. SOUVENIR PROGRAM FOR *RADIO GUEST NIGHT*. NORMAN PRITCHARD. COURTESY OF NORMAN PRITCHARD.

Allum's goal was to produce a show every week. In order to accommodate the many POWs who

wanted to see a production, and to allow time for the entertainers to develop the next production, each show would have a two-week run. As time went on this goal of a producing one show each week would become more difficult to achieve. But the entertainers in Nong Pladuk—similar to those in other POW hospital and relocation camps—were a group of resolute performers who would not be defeated in making sure the shows went on. In Nong Pladuk that determination would be challenged by the most disastrous events.

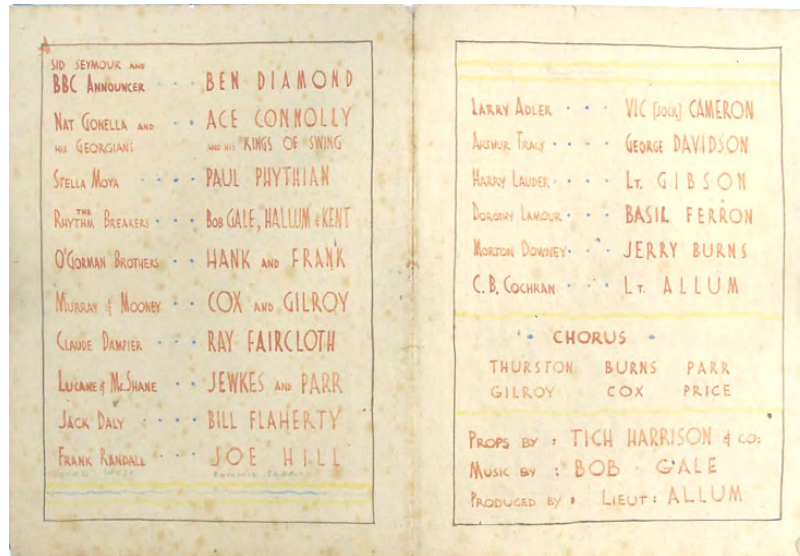


FIGURE 7.5. PLAYBILL FOR *RADIO GUEST NIGHT*. NORMAN PRITCHARD. COURTESY OF NORMAN PRITCHARD.

Radio Guest Night was a staged radio show with a cast of thirty-plus musicians, singers, comedians, and technical staff, filled not only with performers who had appeared earlier in *Cinderella* but with new faces and turns. Following a standard radio show format, it consisted of performers impersonating a series of famous British and American singers, comedians, and musical groups (see playbill above).

Basil Ferron, an Anglo-Indian who impersonated the movie star Dorothy Lamour, became the Harboured Lights' primary "actress." Pritchard described Ferron as "a very small chap . . . slight . . . and could pass for a girl easily."¹⁶ Fergus Anckorn saw him as "a gorgeous looking Indian girl . . . flashing eyes and all the rest of it."¹⁷ Paul Phythian, who played Stella Moya, a well-known British singer, became the leading "female" vocalist with "Ace" Connolly's orchestra.

Since Connolly's orchestra only had four musicians, they were constantly on the lookout for new members. "Whenever a new group came into the camp," Pritchard observed, "they marched in the main gates, and waited their instructions in the middle of the camp. Any man who was carrying a musical instrument was grabbed immediately and introduced to the Concert Party. He was obviously keen, or would not still be carrying an instrument."¹⁸

Two important members of Allum's theatre organization were Sergeant "Tich" Harrison and Phil Hutt. Harrison was in charge of prop construction. As Allum recalled, Harrison and his assistant, Jock Cameron, were willing to tackle any request.

Whatever was suggested by the artistes as an absolute "must" for some scene,

however improbable it was, somehow was built by these two stalwarts. How well I remember a desire to have the curtains of the stage properly pulled by wires as per “pukka” stage! It was “Tich” who, one night, removed the telephone wire linking the Nip guardroom to the Nip officers’ quarters, stripped all the rubber away and fixed the curtains up before the phone was missed. The best part of it all was that the Nips congratulated us on the curtain system at the same time as they were searching for some rubber-covered telephone wire.¹⁹

Sergeant Phil Hutt took on the job as costumer for the new company.

With *Radio Guest Night* “Pritchard Publicity” makes its official appearance. Pritchard, like Wilder, now began to produce a series of souvenir programs for the Nong Pladuk shows.ⁱⁱⁱ²⁰

During the next eleven months, Pritchard produced a series of souvenir programs all drawn, printed, and painted by hand one at a time, which allowed for a wide variation in design and execution of programs for the same production. According to Pritchard’s own estimation, he printed approximately twenty programs for each show.^{iv} His programs represent an extraordinary artistic output, produced, as they were, under increasingly extreme conditions with few resources. Paper, always in short supply, was, Pritchard claimed, “stolen from the Jap Office, with ink or paints similarly obtained, or scrounged from one source or another.”²¹

Wilder and Pritchard: A Comparison

Wilder’s and Pritchard’s skills in drawing, painting, and printmaking differed significantly. Wilder had the ability to draw and paint freehand, including three-dimensional human figures, which Pritchard did not. As a graduate of the Fine Art Department at Reading University before the war, Wilder had been heavily influenced by the work of the British artist Walter Sickert.²² This influence is evident in the artwork for his programs, which contain human figures painted in a mixed naturalistic-impressionistic style in scenes with an implied narrative.

Pritchard, on the other hand, had trained as an architectural draftsman before the war; therefore, his cover designs, such as that for *Radio Guest Night*, above, are predominantly arrangements of geometrical shapes, strong in the use of bold and dynamic lines and lettering produced with the use of a straight edge. The spare use of color may have been Pritchard’s attempt to preserve his supply of inks and watercolors for the long haul.

Whereas Wilder’s program covers (as far as we can tell from the few that have survived) remained similar in style, content, and technique, Pritchard constantly explored his graphic design and printmaking abilities, experimenting with various techniques for applying watercolors or inks to paper. One of his favorites was to use masking devices and stencils with an old toothbrush for spattering.

In the account that follows, comments will be made on notable examples of Wilder’s and Pritchard’s program artwork.

ⁱⁱⁱ With the scarcity of POW diaries and memoirs describing the entertainment in Nong Pladuk, Wilder’s and Pritchard’s programs become, along with the interviews and correspondence with Pritchard and Fergus Anckorn, the primary documentation for reconstructing the role entertainment played in the life of the camp. There is also a list of the shows produced at Nong Pladuk and Ubon hand printed by an anonymous POW on the inside of one of Pritchard’s souvenir programs in the IWM Archives: IWM 9165 Misc 116 (Item 1834).
^{iv} Pritchard supplied the twenty-seven different programs and other drawings for this book before he passed away.

Colonel Toosey Takes Command

When Colonel Toosey took over command of Nong Pladuk from Major Gill on 16 January, there were approximately 4,000 Allied POWs in the two camps. But as more POWs were brought down to Nong Pladuk from construction camps up the line that number swelled to over 8,000, one-third of them N.E.I. troops.²³ These men became a ready supply of laborers to be sent back up the line on maintenance parties.

Knowing that Nong Pladuk would eventually become a target for Allied long-range bombers, one of the first actions Toosey took was to seek permission from Group Commandant Ebiko for the POWs to dig slit trenches around the bases of the huts for their protection. He also assured the performers and artists of his support for weekly entertainment. According to Pritchard, Toosey “did everything he could to maintain performances . . . and said they were of immense importance. And he said [it] publicly, in my hearing.”²⁴ Fergus Anckorn agreed. He remembered Toosey saying, “You know, you chaps are doing the best thing you could ever do. You’re keeping the spirits up.’ And we knew we were doing that.”²⁵

To ensure that his entertainers had the time and energy necessary to produce shows, Toosey persuaded Ebiko to allow them to be assigned “light-duty” work inside the camp, such as digging latrines, working in the cookhouse, or general cleaning.²⁶ This, according to Pritchard, “led to some difficulties and criticism—although it was generally acceptable.”²⁷

New Faces

On 10 February, audiences in Camp No. 1 witnessed the debut of a new group of entertainers “The Dramatics Society” with their production of an original mystery-thriller *Murder at Sea*.

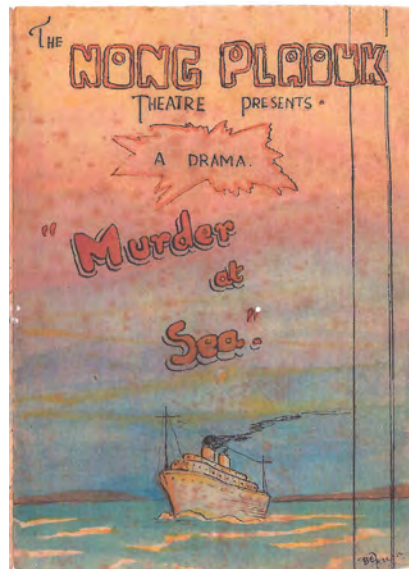


FIGURE 7.6. PROGRAM COVER FOR *MURDER AT SEA*.
BASIL FERRON. COURTESY OF EVE ALLUM.

The founding members of this organization were young officers, two of whom, Lieutenant Lowden and Lieutenant Huntriss, had appeared in *Cinderella*. Another key figure, Lieutenant Michael J. Curtis, had performed as a female impersonator in the “New Windmill Theatre” productions back in Changi.

Murder at Sea will be the first of a series of original plays presented by this group in the camp. Though not produced by the Harboured Lights, their plays will be directed by Allum as well.

As in other camps, all scripts had to be submitted to the Japanese interpreter for censorship days prior to performance. At Nong Pladuk, Fergus Anckorn recalled, they had a unique personage in this role:

We had a Japanese interpreter. His job was to censor the stuff. And he would cross out bits and pieces here and there. And on the night of the show, he would be sitting there with the script in his hand. And suddenly, "Stop it, stop, stop, stop, stop!" And go up and slap a few faces. And we found [out] he didn't know a word of English anyway. He was drawing pay for being an interpreter and censoring these things, and quite often he'd be sitting there with it upside down, and we could see him doing this, you see. And in the end we gave him the same script every week. Whatever the show was, he would check it, and cross bits out. And I had a lot of admiration for him, because he had obviously worked in this racket where he was, I presume, getting paid for doing interpretation—for censoring things. But he knew nothing. So that was how we went on.²⁸

Murder at Sea was followed a week later by *Watch Your Step*, a Harboured Lights revue about the movie business. One of the front curtain acts during scene changes featured the sleight-of-hand artist "Wizardus" (Fergus Anckorn) in his first Nong Pladuk appearance (he had been a member of the Optimists Concert Party in Changi and had recently appeared in the Christmas show at Chungkai hospital camp). Norman Pritchard recalled that his "egg trick" involved fooling more than the members of the audience.

[Anckorn] saw the Jap Commander, who gave him a bit of paper to go to the store to get the egg he needed for the show. But when he got to the source of supply, the Jap had asked him how many he wanted. So, he just realized there was no number on the order.

So he says, "Fifteen." . . .

And I thought he was going to do this egg trick every night for two weeks—with fourteen eggs. And Lester Martin, Gus, and I got a pin—each a pin—and totally took a section of the egg out—a section of the shell out large enough to get the yolk out, put it in a saucepan, and made a lovely omelet . . . which the three of us ate.

*And the next day after the show, the General pulled him in and asked
for an interpreter.*

“What happened to the other eggs?”

So Gus said ([he] had to think pretty fast), “Rehearsals!”

And he got away with it.²⁹

Audio



7.1

On 24 February, the Harboured Lights returned with *Hi Gang!*, the first of Bob Gale’s original revues and musical comedies. Two songs featured in the “In Town Tonight” finale, “A Simple Country Life” and “Take My Seat,” contain some of Gale’s most sophisticated lyrics. The opening verses of “Take My Seat” are a good sample (see the complete lyrics for both these songs in the “FEPOW Songbook”).

Lovely little lady won’t you take my seat.

Guess you’re going shopping down in Oxford Street.

Wish that I could come along with you and buy,

Any latest fashion that you care to try.

Lovely little lady won’t you please sit down.

Are you from the country? Do you live in town?

Guess you’ve got somebody else on your mind to meet,

‘Cos why is it you hesitate to take my seat?^{v30}

[For a contemporary vocal rendition of Bob Gale’s “Take My Seat,” listen to the **Audio Link** in “The FEPOW Songbook.”]

For *Hi Gang!*’s finale, “Tich” Harrison and his technicians produced a revolving stage—a marvel out of wood, steel, and bamboo seen nowhere else in POW theatres along the Thailand-Burma railway (see details of its construction and operation in Chapter 12: “Jolly Good Show!”).

Among the new cast members who appeared in the variety show *When Day Is Done* on 2 March were “Akki” (Bombardier Basil Akhurst), formerly of the P.O.W. WOWS in Changi, and, in a first for the Camp No. 1 stage, “The Hawaiian Serenaders” from Camp No. 2.

^v After the war, Allum used to sing this song to his wife, Eve. For this book, Eve and her daughter Jo, who is a teacher of music and plays in an ensemble, were able to reconstruct the music and ask a fellow musician to perform it.

Camp No. 2 Entertainment Makes an Appearance

The appearance of Dutch/Indonesian performers in a Harboured Lights production suggests that restrictions on interactions between the two camps at Nong Pladuk had eased. A Pritchard souvenir program for “De Hollandsche Revue,” which opened in Camp No. 2 a week later, confirms this idea.

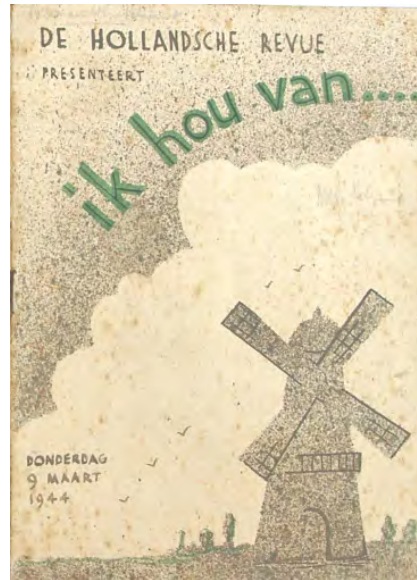


FIGURE 7.7. SOUVENIR PROGRAM FOR *Ik Hou Van HOLLAND*. NORMAN PRITCHARD. COURTESY OF NORMAN PRITCHARD.

Ik hou van Holland is the first known performance by an N.E.I. concert party in Nong Pladuk.^{vi} Some of its members had previously performed in Kanburi hospital camp. The title, which translates as “I love Holland,” is a famous Dutch song, often sung ironically when it’s been raining for weeks.^{vii} The show was produced by Kaptain Sluimers and Lieutenant van Dijk, with music provided by “Matzer en z’n Boys.”



FIGURE 7.8. PLAYBILL FOR *Ik Hou Van HOLLAND*. NORMAN PRITCHARD. COURTESY OF NORMAN PRITCHARD.

^{vi} Pritchard’s program cover for the show illustrated with a windmill and billowing clouds in the background was produced by a series of stencils and toothbrush spatterings.

^{vii} The translation of the title from the Dutch and comments on it are by Margie Samethini-Bellamy, daughter of Han Samethini, the beloved N.E.I. musician.

Among the more than thirty-five N.E.I. performers in the show were the stand-up comics De Zwart and Meyer and the illusionist Kopuit. As a revue, it contained the usual series of musical and comedy sketches, including “De Leeuwentemmers” (The Liantamers) and “De Eeuwige Driehoek” (The Eternal Triangle), as well as a Javanese dance by Keller and Scholten and a Kronsjongmuziek^{viii} offering. It closed with the cast on stage singing the rousing “Eens Komt De Dag” (The Day Will Come), which, because their national anthem was forbidden, became the song of hope that closed all their shows.

Life in Camp No. 2, largely inhabited by N.E.I. troops at this point, was no better than in Camp No. 1. In fact, it may have been worse. Jan van Holthe, the young Dutch artist who had drawn disturbing pictures of the inhuman treatment of POWs by the Japanese in Rin Tin and Tamarkan camps, drew a sketch of the horrors of their dysentery ward.



FIGURE 7.9. “HOSPITAL!!” JAN VAN HOLTHE. COURTESY OF NORMAN PRITCHARD.

The bottles lying among the emaciated sick illustrate the Dutch/Indonesian habit of using bottles of water to cleanse themselves after bowel movements.

Unlike Sergeant Watanabe in Camp No. 1, Sergeant-Major Saito, the NCO administrator in Camp No. 2, allowed concert parties only once a month. For some reason, shows in the two separate camps were never allowed to occur simultaneously, so any show that took place in either camp had to be counted as the only one taking place that week.

New Arrivals

Among the thousands of new POWs flooding into Nong Pladuk during March 1944 and placed in Camp No. 2 were British and N.E.I. troops from Hindato, including entertainers Jimmy Walker, Ken Crossley, and Geoffrey Adams. Major Chida, I. J. A. commandant at Hindato, also came down to Nong Pladuk to become second in command under Group Commandant Ebiko. POWs like Charles Steel thought

^{viii} Kronsjong music was popular folk music developed by Eurasians in the Dutch East Indies.

Major Chida an odd duck: “He is very ancient, almost bent double and puts one in mind of an old chicken. He gets drunk regularly and, in spite of his senility, is a lad with the girls who attend him regularly. . . . He is terrible absent minded. One day he fell down a disused latrine.”³¹

Major Chida valued the entertainers, especially the musicians—he himself played the *shakuhachi* (bamboo flute)—and came up with what he thought was a brilliant idea for their use. He demanded the POWs produce a band, which they did (although at this point it consisted of only a “guitar, a kettledrum, a saxophone and a concertina”³² —the four musicians in Connolly’s orchestra) whose main function was “to march troops out of the gate and back into Camp.”³³ Jimmy Walker observed Chida’s band at its assigned task:

As each squad marched by the orchestra would give forth with a tune appropriate to the lads marching by: “Blaydon Races” or “The British Grenadiers” heralded the Northumberland Fusiliers, “Highland Laddie” for the Argyles and Gordon and so on. But the laugh came in the tailpiece.

The Japs had a cow and it was one prisoner’s task to take it out to grass every morning. He was always last in the procession and as he led his mooing charge past the dais, the band struck up with “I’m An Old Cow-hand From the Rio Grand [*sic*].”³⁴

This wasn’t the only brilliant idea Chida enacted to keep the POWs occupied. Another was the construction of “a vast [Japanese?] garden,” that required “hordes of slaves” to carry stretchers filled with “soil from banana plantations to a part of the camp.” And to top it off, they were put to work “building of a huge replica of the Fujiyama, complete with precisely placed shrines.”³⁵

Escapado Argentino

The last two weeks of March witnessed one of the most popular shows ever produced in Nong Pladuk: Bob Gale’s first musical comedy, *Escapado Argentino*.



FIGURE 7.10. SOUVENIR PROGRAM FOR *ESCAPADO ARGENTINO*, NORMAN PRITCHARD, COURTESY OF NORMAN PRITCHARD.

Besides Connolly's Kings of Swing, the musical aspects of the show featured the Hawaiian Serenaders and a new vocal group, "Robson's Male Voice Choir."



FIGURE 7.11. PLAYBILL FOR *ESCAPADO ARGENTINO*, NORMAN PRITCHARD, COURTESY OF NORMAN PRITCHARD.

The cast included all the regulars of the Harboured Lights concert party plus several new performers like Kitna Price (Dancer) and Fred Knightley and Bernard Hart (the two halves of "Horse").

One of Gale's new songs for the show was "Some-Day."^{ix}

*Some day troubles will be over.
One day, right will conquer wrong.
Peace will come to stay for ever,
And at last we shall view,
All our dreams come true.*

*Life is full of tragic figures,
Fighting vainly to exist.
Why should people have to struggle,
When there's plenty in our midst.*

*One day we will build a new world,
Fashion the shape of things to come.
We'll forget about the blue world,
And the things we came thru
When I come back home to you.³⁶*

Norman Pritchard remembered the show's funniest moment:

Basil [Ferron] was the girl who was kidnapped by the baddie . . . and we [had] a bedroom window on the stage somehow. . . . At the window climbing up a ladder were Hank and Frank, who in the program are labeled as Ben and Joe Speedo . . . and the famous line is that [given by] Basil [as she] stands there as the victim—and there are these two clowns [who] are rescuing her. And she says, "Ben, Joe Speedo! What a relief!" [Laughter].³⁷

Benjo is the Japanese word for toilet/latrine. *Benjo speedo!* was the expression used by the POWs to tell the Japanese/Korean guards they had to "Shit fast!" (in Anckorn's "rough" translation), usually due to an attack of dysentery

One of the most remarkable artifacts that survived the POWs' years of captivity is a typescript for

^{ix} Pritchard produced two different souvenir program covers for the show. Both show him exploring a new, more free-hand style, but still in two-dimensions. One has a cowboy figure in chaps and hat strumming a guitar with multiple colors applied with a brush. The other has the silhouette of a cowboy on a bucking bronco created by the use of a stencil, in which images of the cowboy, horse, and ground are positive images filled in with brown paint. Since he could not draw human figures, Pritchard asked others to draw these for him that he would then trace and cut a stencil. The cowboy with his guitar and the cowboy on his horse look very much like Wilder's contributions.

Escapado Argentino preserved by Lieutenant Allum (see the full text at **Figures 7.12-7.15** in the Image Gallery).

In an entirely new venture, Norman Pritchard took on the role of set designer for the show (see his rendering for the set in Chapter 12: “Jolly Good Show!”).

Anckorn Gets a Bashing

As the “famous” sleight-of-hand artist, Fergus Anckorn was frequently called upon to give private performances for Japanese officers. On one occasion he got into serious trouble.

Up country as you know I had quite a reputation with the Japs who treated me with awe and the odd cigarettes!

I learned to do a 45 minute show entirely in the Japanese language which our interpreter—Thomas—taught me parrot fashion.

At Nong Pladuk I was sent to do a magic show to some Japanese officers including a general (with Toosey’s permission). I did the show entirely in perfect Japanese, and they were delighted, lots of clapping and food. The general came and spoke to me and asked questions (ka?) And I said “wakarimasen” (I don’t understand). He then knocked me down and kicked my face and blackened my eyes. I think he thought I was being arrogant, having heard me speaking Japanese for three quarters of an hour and then saying “wakarimasen.”

When I got back to camp that night Col. Toosey was waiting. I had two black eyes and my top lip stuck out. Col. Toosey said, “My God, Anckorn, what happened?” I said, “They didn’t like the show.” Actually we both laughed!

Toosey then got a card printed for me with words to the effect that I had learned the Japanese words for my show—but spoke none!

In any trouble after that I could flash the card and save a bashing!³⁸

The Show Must Go On

Since the middle of February, musical and theatrical shows had been produced on a regular weekly basis. But the day before *Preying Guests*, the Dramatic Society’s next mystery-thriller, was scheduled to open on 6 April, it was suddenly cancelled by the Japanese. Their rationale? It was “inappropriate for the POWs to have murderous thoughts!”³⁹ Below the credit line on the program Pritchard had prepared, which read “Produced and Presented at Nong Pladuk, Thailand,” is an additional note obviously printed after the cancellation that reads, “Reduced and Resented by the I. J. A.”⁴⁰

In order not to disappoint their audiences—and in the finest of theatrical traditions—the concert party put their creative energies to work and hastily pulled together a variety show entitled *The Show Must Go On* that opened on the sixth instead. Making a virtue out of necessity, they even touted their accomplishment: “the entire show devised and produced in less than 16 hours!” All the regulars were in the show: Hank and Frank, Basil Ferron and Kitna Price, Ben Diamond, Paul Phythian, “Wizardus,” etc., with

music provided by the Hawaiian Serenaders and the Kings of Swing.



FIGURE 7.16. SOUVENIR PROGRAM FOR *THE SHOW MUST GO ON*. NORMAN PRITCHARD. COURTESY OF NORMAN PRITCHARD.

Actually, the complete credit line on the program for *Preying Guests* reads “Produced and Presented at Nong Pladuk, Thailand, by Nong Pladuk Theatre(s) Ltd.” “Theatres.” Allum’s organization, it appears, was now responsible for administering the entertainment in both camps.

The Show Must Go On was the last appearance of the Hawaiian Serenaders in Nong Pladuk, which suggests that they were sent up the line on a maintenance party. One musician in the Kings of Swing also disappears from the orchestra at this time, and it must have been unsettling to the producers and conductors to know that their performers were not exempt from placement on these drafts.

This turn of events made it more important than ever for the concert parties to be on the lookout for fresh talent. When men who played a musical instrument or had sung in hut sing-alongs or on working parties were found, they were encouraged to try out their talents in “Amateur Night Contests.”

In fact, the performers in the first item on the bill for *Stardust*, the next show in Camp No. 1 (13 and 20 April), were three men who had recently been discovered in one of these contests. At the same time, “Ace” Connolly had been successful in finding six new musicians for his orchestra, so his group now totaled nine players. At least one of them, the appropriately named drummer Johnnie Tap, was on loan from the N.E.I. concert party in Camp No. 2. As a conductor, Fred Knightley recalled, Connolly was “a stickler for having things right and many times he had the lads in the band sweating rivers playing a certain piece of music until they had it as nearly right as they could under those conditions.”⁴¹

Stardust featured the first appearance of Nong Pladuk’s “Crazy Gang,” the British equivalent of the Marx Brothers. The composition of this group of six farceurs would change over time as men went sick or deployed elsewhere, but they always remained popular with the POW audiences—and with the Japanese as well: “These were understood and appreciated by the Nips who laughed as heartily as the POW’s, especially when water or whitewash was thrown about.”⁴²

One week later in Camp No. 2, De Hollandsche Revue opened *Mars Express*, a new show for April. Like most revues, it was built around a series of scenes that took place in unusual locations: “De Marsdewoners” (Occupants on Mars), “In De Bar” (In the Bar), “In De Opera” (In the Opera), and so on. It was followed back in Camp No. 1 on 4 and 11 May by an original musical comedy, *Rock and Roll*, written by a group that included Norman Pritchard.^x

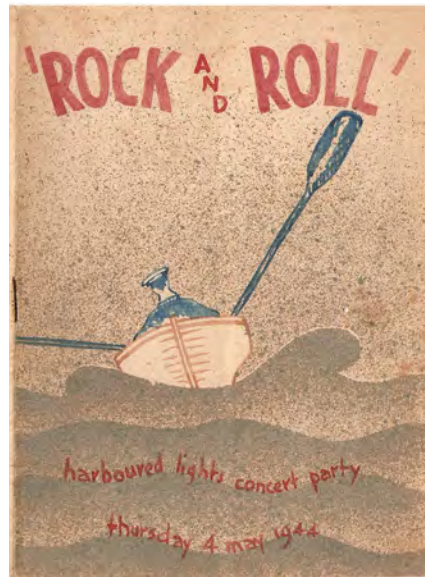


FIGURE 7.17. SOUVENIR PROGRAM FOR *ROCK AND ROLL*.
NORMAN PRITCHARD. COURTESY OF EVE ALLUM.

“A Great New Theatre”—Under Construction

It would be five weeks before another Harboured Lights show was produced in the camp. One of the reasons for the absence is explained by what Charles Steel called a “great new theatre” being built in the northeast corner of Camp No. 1.⁴³ Steel also described the “turf war” that had taken place between Sergeant Watanabe and Sergeant-Major Saito regarding permission to build it: “Permission given by one Japanese Sjt. Permission refused by t’other. Great argument between the two. A great failing of the IJA: no two departments ever work together.”^{xi44}

But another reason for the absence of Harbour Lights’ shows was the fact that two new performing groups made their debuts in Nong Pladuk at this time, which means their shows were the only ones allowed to be produced in the camp. In Camp No. 1 “The Radioptimists” presented a variety show, *Blackpool By-The-Sea*, on 14 May. Their goal was to serve a totally different and needy audience by playing to the sick in the hospital wards.

^x For this production, Pritchard became more adventurous in his printmaking. He employed a series of masks and stencils on the outside and inside of the program to create the waves, the boat, the man in the boat with his raised oars (which must have been drawn by Wilder), and the title. These were then detailed with hand-drawn seagulls, fish, and the lettering of the playbill (see **Figure 7.18** in the Image Gallery)—all pulled together by an overlay of spattered paint. To manufacture these in any number must have been time consuming.

^{xi} Since Steel doesn’t specify, we can’t be certain who promoted and who opposed the construction of this new theatre, but from prior behavior, it can be assumed that Watanabe (who had given permission for the old theatre to be built) had approved the new theatre and it was Saito who opposed it. As a sergeant-major, Saito must have believed he outranked Sergeant Watanabe and therefore had more authority in the matter.



FIGURE 7.19. SOUVENIR PROGRAM FOR *BLACKPOOL BY-THE-SEA*. NORMAN PRITCHARD. COURTESY OF NORMAN PRITCHARD.

Blackpool showcased two new camp discoveries^{xii}: Paddy Flaherty and Pinky Kerswell. It is not clear what Flaherty performed, but Kerswell had the unique ability to “imitate any noise.” The mere mention of his name sparked another story from Fergus Anckorn:⁴⁵

And I remember one day, myself and Bill Wilder, another artist, passed Pinky Kerswell in camp . . . we were walking along, just for fun. And some Jap guards came along, and they looked at him, and he's going, "Boom." Then you hear, "Ba-doom, ba-doom, ba-doom, ba-doom, ba-doom." And then he got out of this non-car, went round the front and was doing this [Anckorn mimes turning the crank], "Ba-doom-do ba-doom-do." And it suddenly roared into life again, and he rushed back and jumped in and went [off] with screeching tires. He was doing all these noises. And the Japs . . . they just looked like this [Anckorn makes a startled, puzzled expression]. And Bill Wilder nearly fell over, he couldn't stand for laughing. And I must say, we laughed our heads off. The Japs laughed as well. And I think they thought he was quite mad . . . 'cause he used to do this whenever he was working, he'd made these noises.⁴⁶

Audio



7.2

As the Radioptimists were soon to discover, performing in the hospital wards was not without its dangers. Colonel Toosey's "Official Report" describes an incident wherein a severe beating was meted out to three members of the Radioptimists for allegedly insulting a Japanese sergeant during one of their

^{xii} Pritchard's design for the Blackpool program cover is his first to employ a three-dimensional image drawn free-hand. A representation of the famous tower at the Blackpool seaside resort has a long banner attached to its top that swirls behind and in front of the tower.

performances.^{xiii47}

The other new concert party was a British troupe in Camp No. 2, who opened a show ten days later for Empire Day. One of the producers, Geoffrey Pharaoh Adams, had been involved in shows up the line at Hindato. In Nong Pladuk he was successful in persuading Sergeant-Major Saito to allow the group to use stage lighting, which might have been Saito's attempt at one-upmanship over Sergeant Watanabe.

It would be three weeks before another show was produced in Nong Pladuk. In addition to the new theatre under construction, two other happenings foiled attempts to keep the shows going on. One was the early arrival of the rainy season, which collapsed the air-raid trenches dug around the base of the huts, bringing them down as well. It took all hands to get the huts quickly rebuilt.⁴⁸ Instead of new air-raid trenches, Ebiko ordered that all POWs should immediately move to their huts during an air attack and remain there. To ensure compliance, he threatened to bayonet any POW found outside. This policy would have disastrous consequences.

The second event also caused considerable disruption to camp life. The POW administration had received orders to prepare drafts of Nong Pladuk prisoners for overseas deployment to Japan. Among those in the first drafts were Jimmy Walker and Ken Crossley. Transported by train down to Singapore, they were crowded onto "hell ships" and departed for Japan on 2 June.^{xiv}

The "Great New Theatre" Debut

The opening of the long-awaited "great new theatre" in Camp No. 1 took place on 15 June with the Harboured Lights production of *Sawdust, the Greatest Farce since "Charley's Aunt"*—a takeoff on *Stardust*, their last show. *Sawdust* was a musical comedy featuring the six members of the Crazy Gang playing members of "The Woodwork (but won't) Family," along with other characters, in a plot that involved some sort of contract dispute between a Night Club Manager (Fergus Anckorn) and a group of entertainers.^{xv}

One of Bob Gale's songs for the show, "I Don't Mind," expresses what most of the POWs fervently hoped as they worried about their loved ones back home:

*I don't mind what happens to me,
As long as nothing ever happens to you.
I don't mind if someone harms me,
As long as no one ever tries to harm you.*⁴⁹

^{xiii} Toosey kept a record of all such brutal treatment so that it might be used in testimony against their captors at the end of the war.

^{xiv} Of the ten unmarked ships in their convoy, only six reached their destination. The others were sunk by American submarines trying to disrupt the Japanese supply route. Walker and Crossley ended up in Iruka, Japan, where they teamed up with a playwright named "Plum" Warner (who was an Oxford graduate), formed another concert party, "The Iruka Players," and produced a remarkable series of entertainments until their liberation [Walker, Interview, 20–24 passim].

^{xv} From the crude artwork on his program cover, it appears that Pritchard did not have the services of anyone who could draw human figures for him, so he made an attempt to draw them himself (see **Figure 7.20** in the Image Gallery).

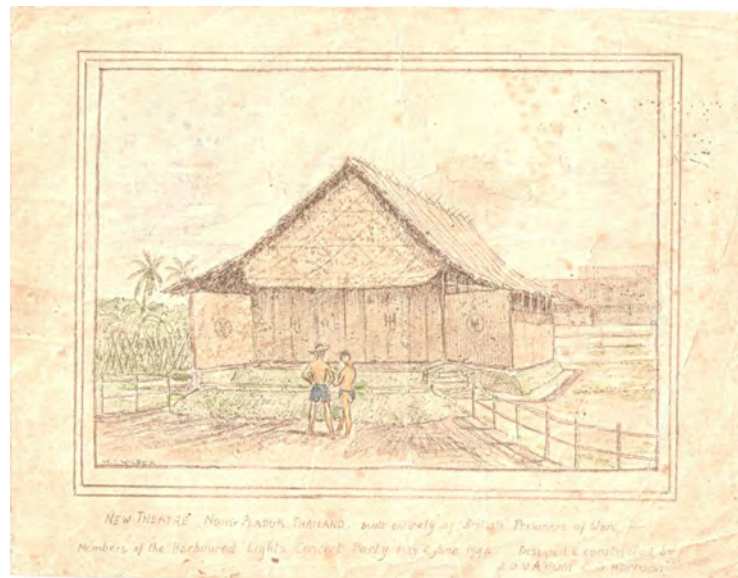


FIGURE 7.21. "GREAT NEW THEATRE." WILLIAM WILDER. COURTESY OF EVE ALLUM AND ANTHONY WILDER.

William Wilder's sketch of the "great new theatre" shows a large proscenium theatre sitting on a raised mound of earth with a pitched roof that comes down on either side to cover the offstage areas, thus making them more commodious than the previous ones. Each of the proscenium's side walls, as well as the front curtain, is decorated with the new Harboured Lights logo. A woven bamboo "awning" shields the front of the stage from the rain. Since lighting was never allowed in Camp No. 1, it's likely the roof still contained a large hinged flap that let the sunlight into the upstage areas.⁵⁰ As in the previous theatre, the shallow orchestra pit is separated from the audience by a raised mound of earth. Notes on the back of Wilder's sketch give the theatre's dimensions: "Height 22', Width 32', Length 40'. Stage 20' long X 22.' Auditorium 30' front widening to 60' back."⁵¹

A week later an all-star variety show, *Anything Goes*, had among its standard format of musical numbers and comic sketches several new faces and unique turns: "Fleas in Custody" (performed by Professor [Major] Mitchell and "Oscar," his performing flea) and "Nong Pladuk's First Illusionist," the N.E.I. performer Rene Kopuit in his first Harboured Lights production.⁵² Incorporation of N.E.I. performers from Camp No. 2 in Harboured Lights' shows was now taking place on a regular basis. Another new face was Frederick "Bunny" Austin who had replaced Johnnie Tap as drummer in the Kings of Swing. Austin had been a Private and Bandsman (Percussionist) with the East Surrey Regiment. During an interview when he was ninety, "Bunny" remembered one verse from "Oh What A Night for Love," one of Bob Gale's songs. "It was a humorous song, you know. This one verse was:

*A rosy garden may be all very well,
But when the air contains a horrible smell,
She thinks it's you, she may be right, who can tell?
Oh what a night for love!"*

[To hear “Bunny” Austin sing these lyrics, listen to **Audio Link 7.3**]

Audio



7.3

With *Anything Goes*, “Tich” Harrison disappears from the entertainment scene at Nong Pladuk and his second in command, Vic Cameron, takes over responsibilities for set construction. It’s possible that Harrison had been placed on one of the Japan drafts.

William Wilder was also scheduled with one of these Japan Parties, but a clever use of his artistic skills got him removed from the list. Before departing, each POW was examined to see if he not only were fit to travel but would be fit to work when he arrived in Japan. Anckorn recalled the ruse Wilder used to get off the draft:

We all had ulcers and things on our legs and on our feet—and Bill Wilder, on this particular occasion, had a very sore big toe (I think it was an ingrown toenail, or something like that), but he was having difficulty walking. But what he did, before he went on parade for the Japs to examine him, he painted his toe with greens and reds and purples, and all sorts of colors all round it, and it looked disgusting [Chuckles] and horrible, and as soon as the Japs saw his toe they sent him back. So he didn’t go on that party [Laughs]. Oh dear, the things we got up to.⁵³

Wilder’s painting skills had probably saved his life.

In Camp No. 2, Geoffrey Adams’ days as a concert party producer were also short lived as he, too, was included on a draft for Japan. He would end up in Omuta, a POW camp where entertainment rarely took place.⁵⁴ For the next two months, large numbers of prisoners from Nong Pladuk were sent overseas to Japan, greatly reducing the population of POWs in the camp.

Reality Check

As the months dragged on, discouraging news about the long, hard slog it was going to be before victory in the war in Europe could be achieved sank in, and the “quiet optimism” faded. As Allied reconnaissance (“recce”) flyovers became a daily occurrence, raising fears that Nong Pladuk would soon become a target for long-range bombers trying to prevent continued use of the railway, the entertainers would face an even greater challenge in keeping their audiences’ hopes alive.

Because the camp had no effective air raid warning system, “Ace” Connolly and his trumpet were enlisted to provide such a service when notified by the Japanese that an air raid was pending. Fred Knightley remembered one instance when that scheme almost went awry following a beating Connolly had received by a Japanese soldier for some unknown offense.

The serious part of it was that Ace’s lips were split and swollen so that he couldn’t play his trumpet. After this had happened he was called to the Jap guard house and was told to blow the air raid warning as a raid was imminent. Pointing to his lips he told them that it was almost impossible. Anyway he did his best and the camp got the message and went to ground. The raid did not materialize and no one got hurt except the Jap who had beaten Ace because he in turn was beaten by his own Sergeant Major Watanabee [sic] for endangering the lives of the Japs by putting the air raid warning system out of action.⁵⁵

“Ace” Connolly was never beaten again.



FIGURE 7.22. SOUVENIR PROGRAM FOR *HOME AFFAIRS*.
NORMAN PRITCHARD. COURTESY OF NORMAN PRITCHARD.

On the second Sunday in July, the Radioptimists presented their next hospital ward tour show, the radio play *Home Affairs*. This drama dealt with attempts to get a falsely accused condemned prisoner released before it was too late—a theme that certainly carried resonance for the POWs. And Pinky Kerswell, finding his ideal niche as a performer, is credited with providing all the sound effects for the show.^{xvi}

^{xvi} As with his previous program for the Radioptimists, Pritchard’s piece for *Home Affairs* explores the techniques of perspective drawing even further. Here he uses an off-center vanishing point toward which the city buildings on right and left recede. In the foreground are the back ends of a number of vehicles, including a double-decker bus, which are also moving into the distance. By using multiple masks, stencils, and limited colors, Pritchard produced one of his most unusual and handsome covers.

The Harboured Lights returned to the stage for a two-week run (13 and 20 July) with another “non-stop variety,” *Any More for Sailing*.^{xvii}

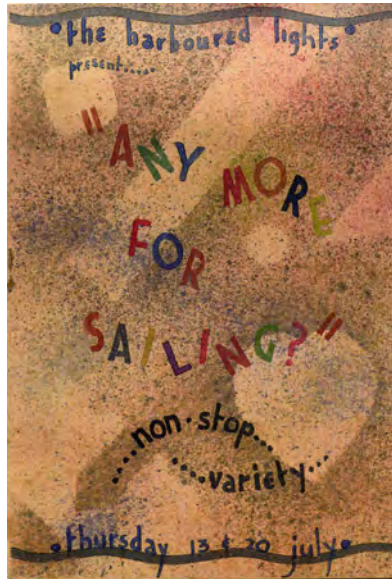


FIGURE 7.23. SOUVENIR PROGRAM FOR *ANY MORE FOR SAILING*. NORMAN PRITCHARD. COURTESY OF NORMAN PRITCHARD.



FIGURE 7.24. PLAYBILL FOR *ANY MORE FOR SAILING*. NORMAN PRITCHARD. COURTESY OF NORMAN PRITCHARD.

^{xvii} In marked contrast to the limited range of color used for his previous programs, Pritchard's program for *Any More for Sailing* explodes with bright color—the result of his recent purchase of a new box of eight tubes of watercolor paint from a Dutch POW [Pritchard, Interview, 10-11]. With its complex and imaginative use of stencils, masks, and spatter creating a multi-layered, three-dimensional look, this program shows Pritchard at the height of his graphic design and printmaking powers.

Besides the concert party regulars performing their turns was a large-cast comedy sketch that had many new performers, a “topical sketch,” performed by four officers (members of “The Dramatics Society”), and a fourteen-character two-act play written by Bob Gale.

As the playbill discloses, by the time *Any More for Sailing* went on, Connolly had lost four of his former musicians, including Matsy (one of his original group of four), but had gained two new N.E.I. players, bringing the size of his ensemble down to seven.

“Bums on Seats”

The playbill for *Any More for Sailing* signals an important change taking place in the content of Nong Pladuk productions. They were evolving from band or variety-type shows into revues with more sketches or even full-blown musical comedies. Without fresh input from the outside world, band and variety shows, even with the capabilities of a gifted songwriter like Bob Gale, were losing their attraction. What did appeal, as *Any More for Sailing* reveals, were sketches, plays, and musical comedies with engaging plots and characters devised by a pool of talented writers. Including more of this type of material in productions was not only a way to relieve pressure on the musicians but a means to keep the audiences’ “bums on seats.”



FIGURE 7.25. PROGRAM COVER FOR NONGPLADUK NONSENSE. NORMAN PRITCHARD. COURTESY OF NORMAN PRITCHARD.

Nongpladuk Nonsense, which opened on 27 July, confirms this hypothesis.^{xviii} The show was primarily a series of short plays and sketches: a melodrama, “Hags Bush Farm”; a murder-mystery, “Crime Does Not Pay”; followed by a burlesque of it, “Crime Does Pay”; and the resurrection of a favorite sketch from Keppel Harbour days, “Smiles on the Nile,” in which Hank Phillips repeated his starring role as Cleopatra, but with Frank Moule, instead of Jimmy Walker, playing Mark Antony “without his pants.” With thirty-five performers, this large-cast show also had many new faces.

^{xviii} Although simpler in design than his previous one, the program for Nongpladuk Nonsense is rich with color, and here Pritchard returns to his explorations of free-hand drawing with a playful performing seal and clown figures (see playbill, Figure 7.26 in the Image Gallery).

It opened with a talent competition showcasing new camp discoveries, one of whom was “The Whistle Willie”: William Wilder in his first—and only—appearance on stage playing a tin whistle. “Went down fairly well I think,” he wrote. “There was a prize, judged by the amount of applause; a sketch and two singers competed, however I won! Was presented with \$2 on the stage by Colonel Toosey.” Wilder was convinced that his friends, Anckorn and Pritchard, had been clacks in the audience leading the applause.⁵⁶

It wasn’t until 24 August that Camp No. 1 saw the next production, *Hi Spirits*, another Dramatics Society comedy-mystery-thriller. The magical “séance effects” for the show were created by “Wizardus” and included a scene where “two candles actually came up out of their candlesticks and crossed across the table, passing each other on the way, and went back into the other candle sticks . . . [which] brought the house down.”⁵⁷ Another “séance effect” involved appearances and disappearances achieved by repeated use of the revolving stage.

In Camp No. 2, De Hollandsche Revue, hard hit by the loss of troops on maintenance and Japan Parties, had not produced a show since May. *Geef Me Nog Een Droppie* (*Give Me Just One Little Drop More*) was their show for August. Presented on 31 August in celebration of Queen Wilhelmina’s birthday, it, too, like the recent Harboured Lights productions, was composed primarily of sketches. In its second half there was a four-act play, “Klein Duimpje” (Small Duimpje), with such characters as Bibo, Babo, and Bobo, and “De Gelaarsde Kat” (The Gelaarsde Cat) played by “Nigger.”⁵⁸

Everyone knew who “Nigger” was. She was the black female cat who hung around the canteen and was adopted by the POWs as a pet. They were always delighted when she produced another litter of kittens they could play with.⁵⁹ It’s possible that “Nigger’s” presence in the show was inspired by the cartoon film character Felix the Cat and represented on stage by a human being in a cat costume.

Instead of the usual small group of musicians, “Ace” Connolly and his Kings of Swing provided the music. Since many Dutch/Indonesian musicians were already in Connolly’s orchestra, this *quid quo pro* arrangement allowed De Hollandsche Revue to have the benefit of a full orchestra for their show.

The First Bombing Raid

The comparatively quiet life in the Nong Pladuk camps was about to come to an end. On 5 September Major Ebiko announced that he was leaving and that Major Chida would become the new camp commandant. That night at 2 a.m., the first long-expected Allied bombing raid took place. Steel wrote about its terrible aftermath in his diary: “As soon as it was possible to move about, we found that four bombs had been placed directly across the centre of the Camp, while another stick had fallen down one side. The scenes were gruesome in the extreme as the bombs had exploded while the POWs were lying asleep, tightly packed in their huts.”⁶⁰ This was the disastrous result of Major Ebiko’s orders confining the POWs to their huts during a bombing raid.

Captain Ewert Escritt, a member of Toosey’s staff, summed up the terrible carnage: “One bomb wounded several Offrs., of whom one died and one lost a leg; 2 other bombs fell on the central hut of the Camp and immediately outside the Hospital, respectively. These 2 caused over 400 casualties, incl. over 90 killed and died of wounds.”⁶¹ Like others, Anckorn tried to escape being placed on the burial detail by volunteering to work that day at the Hashimoto Engineering Works. But the ploy didn’t work.

*And when we came back in the camp, those corpses were still there,
and Colonel Toosey met us, and he said, “I want to ask you boys a favor. Now
these men have all got to be buried, and the grave is about a half a mile down*

*the road. Now, someone's got to do it, and you're fitter than most of them, so I'm going to ask you, as a favor, to bury them. And if you do, you will all get an extra rice cake." And I remember thinking then, "My god, what have we come to. That we're being offered an extra rice cake to bury these men."*⁶²

As the burial party made its way to the cemetery, a huge storm with thunder and lightning came up. The deluge of water dissolved the stretchers' fabric, depositing the body parts on the ground. Anckorn called the scene, "Surreal. Awful!"⁶³

One unlikely recipient of special commendation in Escritt's report was Sergeant Watanabe, the I. J. A. administrative N.C.O. for Camp No. 1: "One Japanese preferred human duty to self-protection—Sgt. WATANABE, I.J.A. N.C.O. of the Camp, proceeded at once to the bombed area, himself carried to the Hospital one of the first casualties and assisted generally in directing P.O.W. to drains while the raid proceeded."⁶⁴ Since the hospital had been badly damaged in the attack, many of the seriously wounded were immediately transferred to the hospital camp at Nakhon Pathom. One of these was the actor "Ted" Ingram. Once recovered, he would become a major player in the Nakhon Pathom concert party.

Out of this tragedy Norman Pritchard gained a new friend: the Dutch artist Jan van Holthe. "Over one hundred men died that night, including several of Jan's friends," Pritchard wrote. "Jan's hut was burnt down and he lost all his possessions. I was able to help him, by sharing my own meagre supply of paints and paper. . . . He gave me many lessons in perspective and drawing techniques. This joint activity helped us both tremendously."⁶⁵

Camp Amalgamation

After the disastrous air raid, and in response to Colonel Toosey's protestations, Chida allowed the POWs to dig slit trenches away from the huts for their protection. But in a perverse reaction to Toosey's insistence that the more vulnerable of the two camps (Camp No. 1) be moved to a safer location, Chida ordered "all the personnel from the second P.O.W. Camp further from the Rly. [Camp No. 2] moved into the more dangerous one. The less vulnerable Camp was thus left empty."⁶⁶ The POWs now believed the Japanese were deliberately trying to protect their supply depot by using the prisoners as human shields. But it's quite possible that a befuddled Major Chida had confused which camp was which in his orders.

During the amalgamation of Camp No. 2 into Camp No. 1, a new I. J. A. administrative N.C.O., Sergeant Takashima, was put in charge of the combined camp. In retaliation for the bombing attack, he immediately limited the number of performances to one every three weeks—a policy meant to have a negative effect on the prisoners' morale. And when entertainment did resume, it would not be in their "great new theatre." One detail not mentioned in Escritt's report of the destruction caused by the air raid was the fact that the theatre had been so badly damaged that it had to be rebuilt, which would take some time.

With the two camps being combined into one, a decision was made to amalgamate the two concert parties as well. There would be no further shows by De Hollandsche Revue in Nong Pladuk.

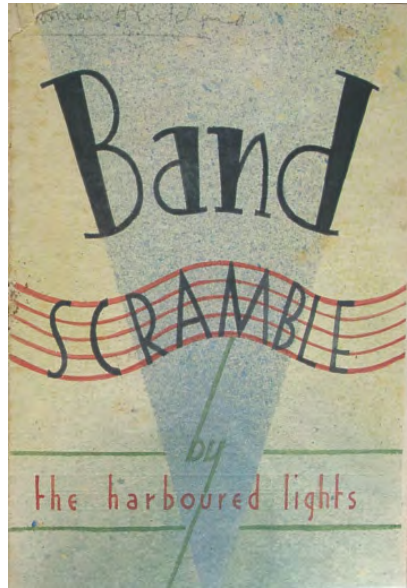


FIGURE 7.27. SOUVENIR PROGRAM FOR *BAND SCRAMBLE*.
NORMAN PRITCHARD. COURTESY OF NORMAN
PRITCHARD.

And Captain Escritt wasn't the only person to acknowledge N.C.O. Watanabe's humanitarian assistance during the raid; so did the concert party—and publicly. One of the farcical sketches by the Crazy Gang in *Band Scramble* contained the following lines: "What a Temple! 'What a Chapel! 'What an Abbey! (Wa-ta-nabe). And we did it two or three times," Pritchard recounted. "And he [Watanabe] clearly acknowledged us afterwards because we were so anxious to applaud what he'd done . . . that we used, 'What an Abbey!'"⁶⁷ The literal translation of that phrase, as well as its context, had gotten it past the censor. Its real meaning only became apparent when spoken aloud by an actor on stage.

Since the audiences now contained a large number of Dutch/Indonesians, there was a concerted effort to include as many N.E.I. performers in the shows as possible. *Band Scramble* had Maxie de Vlucht (promoted as "Java's Cab Calloway") and the "Continental Dancers" Frans and Skippy in guest spots.⁶⁸ Anckorn had fond memories of these latter two performers:

Frans and Skippy were Dutch and really excellent dancers. Skippy was exactly like Marlene Dietrich! Wilhelm something or other . . . was as queer as a clockwork orange—and dare I say it—to us at the time, she looked gorgeous. He was a partner of a black, Javanese fellow [Frans]. And they used to dance ravishing tangos and dances. She (he) had the most wonderful gowns—God knows where the material came from (we scarcely had material enough for a handkerchief).

*I mean, you'd swear he was a girl. And people would cheer like mad when she came on. I say, "she," because that's all you could have [thought]—blond, blue-eyed, and with a face like a doll.*⁶⁹

Band Scramble had been an appropriate title for the show in more ways than one. Not only had the Harboured Lights “scrambled” to get a show on as soon as possible—and at a new location—to counter the low morale caused by the loss of life in the bombing attack, but Connolly’s orchestra, either from death or injury, had been “scrambled” as well. Six new musicians were added to the group, five of whom were Dutch/Indonesian.^{xix}

The New Theatre Reopens

On Wednesday, 18 October, a Pritchard program cover proudly announced the reopening of the rebuilt “great new theatre”: “Nong Pladuk Theatres request the pleasure of your company at the New Theatre . . . for a performance of *Invitation to Murder*,” another original comedy-thriller produced by the Dramatics Society.⁷⁰ Unlike the earlier comedy-thriller *Preying Guests*, which had been cancelled for “having murderous thoughts,” there had been no objection on the part of the Japanese to this production.⁷¹

“Toothy” Martin, the camp dentist, remembered being cast in this play as a dashing spy: “The Saint or 007 (‘Ian Sinclair’), and had to embrace Ferron beautifully dressed as a passionate female spy (‘Lorna Winkworth’), with great cries from the audience, ‘Kiss her, Toothy!’ ‘Have a go, Toothy!’”⁷¹ (Whether he did or not was not revealed.)

Given Takashima’s new restrictions, it was three weeks before another show went on.^{xx} *Rhythm Roundabout*, which opened on 8 November, included De Hollandsche Revue’s leading “Conferencier” (“Master of Ceremonies”) and comedian, de Zwart, and a reappearance by the popular Dutch dance duo, Skippy and Frans. Henceforth, these two dancers would become regulars in the Harboured Lights’ productions.^{xxi}

The Second Bombing Raid

In the second week of November, another bombing raid took place during the night but incurred only minor damage and no casualties. As a further consequence of this raid, however, life in Nong Pladuk became, in the words of one POW, “very severe.”⁷³

Suspicious that the POWs were somehow in communication with the Allied Forces, the I. J. A. required all valuables and writing instruments be handed in. Not willing to comply with these orders, Wilder, Pritchard, and van Holthe had to make doubly sure their paper and art supplies were well hidden, for they would be severely punished if caught. Under these tightened restrictions, shows could be cancelled seemingly on a whim by Sergeant Takashima, and Charles Steel, for one, was not happy about the situation: “He will cancel a concert in ten minutes before it begins or suddenly announce that there must be no talking on stage, no laughter among the audience. Or he will stop a football match if he sees the Koreans [guards] enjoying it. Or, perhaps, send half our [canteen] staff to work without notice. I’d like to kill him!”⁷⁴

Takashima’s intent, of course, was to harass and dishearten the POWs—and the Koreans, too, it appears—from taking any pleasure in their leisure-time activities while the war was going badly for the Japanese.

The first show produced after the second bombing raid was *Damages: One Hour of Music*, another radio bandstand variety show that opened on 22 November. The title is a pun on Gamages, a well-known

^{xix} With only one further personnel change, this Kings of Swing orchestra would remain stable for the rest of the prisoners’ time in Nong Pladuk.

^{xx} A casualty of the new restrictions was a musical revue, *The Sheik*, that had been scheduled for 24 October.

^{xxi} For the *Rhythm Roundabout* show Pritchard’s continued his profligate use of color on the cover as well as on the playbill in a design that visualizes the show’s title (see **Figure 7.28** and **Figure 7.29** in the Image Gallery).

London department store. But in the best barracks humor tradition, it also referred to the state of their own “shop.” Like its predecessors, it had an all-star cast combining British and Dutch/Indonesian performers, including the N.E.I. violinist Nico Brunz, who “always started the show with a rousing piece on his violin – quite often backed with the orchestra,” Anckorn remembered. “And it was just like a theatre in England, you know, the overture. . . . And he was a brilliant violinist and we liked him.”⁷⁵

Anckorn Takes a Flyer

It was about this time that Fergus Anckorn was involved in another incident that was even more threatening to his future in the camp than the previous one had been.

But did I tell you about the Korean who got hold of me one day? Walked over to me and said (he spoke a few words of English—in the whole time I only met two who knew anything of English).

And he came over, and he said to me, “You magic man?” I said, “Yes.” And he said to me, “You have beautiful hands.” I thought, yeah, you know that. What’s this?

And I said, “I don’t know you.” He said, “I see you in Wampo.” So he must have seen me doing some of these things and remembered me. And I said, “How do you know me?” He said, “I see you. I magic man, too.” I said, “Are you?”

He said, “Yes. You teach me magic?” I said, “Yes.” (His name was Tomimoto.) So he said, “You, tonight, come to my house.” (He called it “my house.”) So I said, “Oh, I don’t think I can do that.” “You come, you’re my guest.”

So, I went over to his barracks. Now, the whole of the camp area was [riddled with] air raid trenches, ’cause we used to get bombed a lot. You couldn’t walk without having to step over one, in any direction.

So I went to him—I asked the Colonel [Toosey] first, “Is it alright that I go? Because he says he’s a magician.” And he said, “Anything you can do to foster a little bit of feeling, fine.” (I wanted to make quite certain that I didn’t get a reputation of being “Jap Happy,” ’cause that’s a terrible thing.) So I went.”⁷⁶

[To hear the unexpected and shocking outcome of this attempt at friendship between two enemies sharing an interest in magic, listen to **Audio Link 7.4.**]

Audio



7.4

A Third Bombing Raid

Intent on destroying the strategic importance of Nong Pladuk, the Allies unleashed a third major bombing raid on 3 December while the POWs were eating their evening meal. The first wave of bombers attacked the engineering workshops, the storehouse, and the POW cookhouse. A second wave included incendiary bombs that burnt down the hospital. Anckorn, who was out of his hut when the planes came over very low, dove into a slit trench and ended up being buried alive for several minutes when a bomb burst on top of him.⁷⁷ Several POWs were killed in the raid. Following the attack, Colonel Toosey made a strong protest to Chida about the vulnerability of some of the POW accommodations, and this time the cookhouse and personnel in several huts nearest the railway were evacuated to new and safer areas.⁷⁸

In retaliation for this new bombing attack, further shows were cancelled—until Christmas. Morale among the POWs now reached an all-time low, and it became more important than ever to produce shows that would keep their spirits going. As Christmas approached, rumors of an elaborate production of the traditional pantomime *Babes in the Wood* were spread though the camp. At the very least, the rumors provided anticipation of future delights.

Back in 1943, the POWs up the line at Takanun had been able to pull the wool over their Japanese censor's eyes about the real significance of their version of the pantomime, even though they had openly called it *Babes in Thailand*. As Norman Pritchard reveals, the POWs at Nong Pladuk were not so fortunate:

(By the way, most Nip interpreters could read little English, and an Allied interpreter would invariably be on hand to explain doubtful passages—this meant translating the lot!). When “Babes in the Wood” was explained, the official Jap reply was—No, you may not perform this pantomime. We consider that the Babes represent you prisoners of war, the Wicked Uncles refer to the Japanese, and Robin Hood and his Merry Men . . . were the Allied Parachutists coming to rescue the POW's.⁷⁹

Not deterred by the refusal, the entertainers rose to the occasion once again and on Christmas Day, instead of the panto, presented *Escapado Argentino: The Sequel*, Bob Gale's follow-up to his earlier smash hit. This time it was Pritchard's Dutch friend, Jan van Holthe, who designed the scenery for the show.^{xxii}

^{xxii} Both Wilder and Pritchard designed programs for this production. Wilder's program cover is illustrated with an Argentinean couple in nineteenth-century dress dancing in a café—possibly a reference to the final scene of the musical that took place in “The Café Argentina”; Pritchard's shows a cowboy on a bucking bronco, reusing the stencil he had made for his earlier *Escapado* program (see **Figure 7.30** in the Image Gallery).



FIGURE 7.31. SOUVENIR PROGRAM FOR *ESCAPADO ARGENTINO: THE SEQUEL*. WILLIAM WILDER. COURTESY OF ANTHONY WILDER.

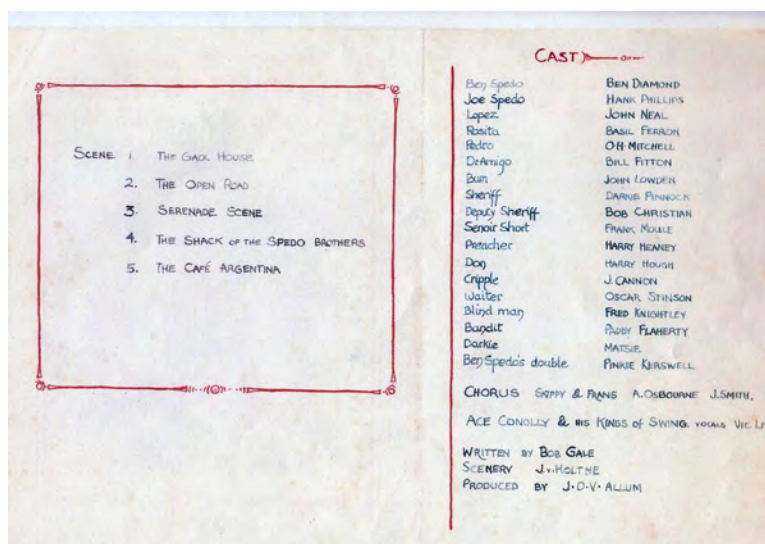


FIGURE 7.32. PLAYBILL FOR *ESCAPADO ARGENTINO*. WILLIAM WILDER. COURTESY OF ANTHONY WILDER.

For this *Sequel* the original cast had been increased significantly from fourteen to twenty-four players (see playbill above). Because of the death and injuries caused by the bombings—as well as absences due to the maintenance and Japan parties—only a few of the original cast members remained: Basil Ferron repeated his role as Rosita, and Frank and Hank appeared once again as Ben and Joe Speedo. (Would they repeat the famous gag line from the earlier show? Their audiences would be waiting for it and overjoyed to have their expectations fulfilled.) One intriguing twist to the new plot involved Pinky Kerswell playing “Ben Spedo’s [sic] double.”

The Last Bombing Raid

Any New Year’s Eve festivities planned for Nong Pladuk were forestalled by a fourth bombing attack that occurred during the late afternoon on 31 December. The results, again, were devastating: several men were killed, Hashimoto’s workshop heavily damaged, the hospital burnt down, the cookhouse destroyed, and several other buildings severely affected. For many, the psychological damage was even worse. “Men are walking about with just a ball bag on,” observed a badly shaken Steel, “having lost all other kit. Many men with mental disorders. The strain of being Aunt Sallies [sitting ducks] is rather great.”⁸⁰

1945

In spite of the attack, the Harboured Lights went ahead with their production of *Crazy Café* on New Year’s Day as planned. It would divert attention from the attack and help keep morale up. *Crazy Café* was a compilation of favorite turns from their 1944 variety shows. “Johnnie” von Holthe again designed the scenery.

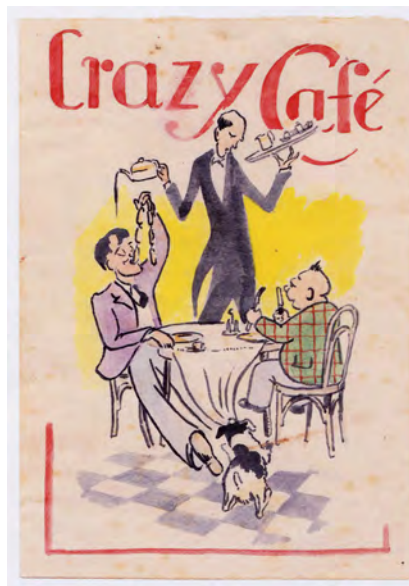


FIGURE 7.33. SOUVENIR PROGRAM FOR *CRAZY CAFÉ*.
WILLIAM WILDER. COURTESY OF ANTHONY WILDER.



FIGURE 7.34. SOUVENIR PROGRAM FOR *CAFÉ CRAZE*.
NORMAN PRITCHARD. COURTESY OF NORMAN PRITCHARD.

Both Wilder and Pritchard produced programs for this show. Pritchard’s has a large, three-dimensional figure of a saluting café doorman. And the artist who drew the human figure on his cover this

time was Jan van Holthe as “Pritchard Publicity” had become “Pritchard—van Holthe Publicity.”

Farewell Nong Pladuk

With the war going badly for Japan, the captors began to fear that the POW officers might at some point lead their men in a breakout and join up with the Free Thai guerillas. To forestall such an event, all the officers in all the POW camps, except for a few essential medical personnel, were ordered removed to the new officers-only camp at Kanburi by the end of January. There they would face some of their greatest challenges in keeping entertainment going (see Chapter 9: “The Battle for Concerts”). This phased departure eventually claimed the Harboured Lights’ remarkable producer-director, Lieutenant Allum, who had inspired his entertainers to persevere no matter what the circumstances. The concert party carried on until he left.

On 10 January there was an *Impromptu Show*, followed a week later by a show called *Three Moods*, with Jan van Holthe returning Pritchard’s recent favor by inviting him to join in designing the setting.

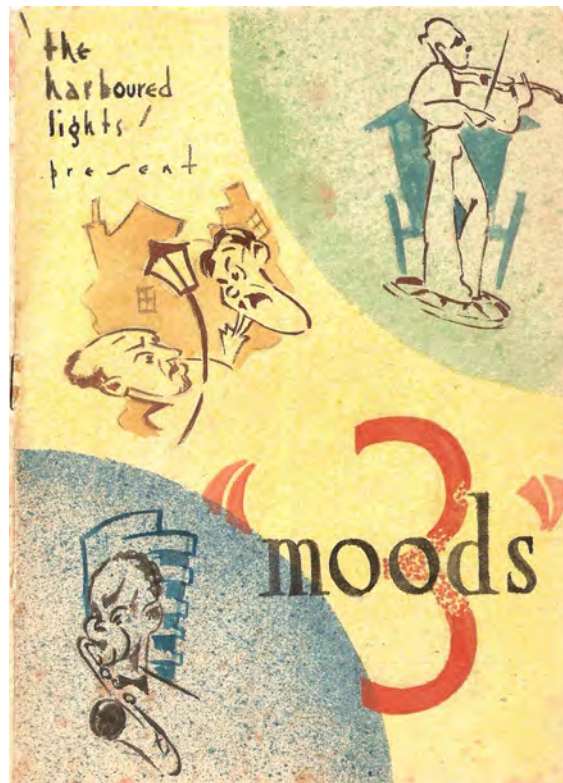


FIGURE 7.35. SOUVENIR PROGRAM COVER FOR *THREE MOODS*. NORMAN PRITCHARD AND JAN VAN HOLTHE. COURTESY OF EVE ALLUM.

Pritchard and van Holthe’s program is rich with color and caricatures that show the comics Hank Phillips and Frank Moule, the saxophonist Bob Gale, and the Dutch violinist Nico Brunz (see **Figure 7.36** in the Image Gallery for the playbill).

On 31 January, *Farewell Nong Pladuk*—the last show produced in Nong Pladuk—took place. With

all the loss of life and limb suffered in the bombing attacks, it was a bittersweet celebration.

It wasn't long before the other ranks, too, received their marching orders. They were to be sent three hundred miles to the east to start construction of two airfields at Ubon. The POWs would be glad to put Nong Pladuk behind them. Once a theatre could be established at the new location, "Ace" Connolly and his Kings of Swing—and all the other British and Dutch/Indonesian entertainers—would make sure the shows still went on (see Chapter 10: "Strike A New Note!").

Endnotes

- 1 Escritt, in Toosey, 15.
- 2 Toosey, 10.
- 3 Toosey, 11.
- 4 Toosey, 11.
- 5 Anonymous, IWM 95/9/1, 196.
- 6 Baume, 47.
- 7 Kershaw, 63.
- 8 Kershaw, 63.
- 9 Walker, E-mail, 25 January 2005; Letter, 26 January 2005.
- 10 Dewey, Judy & Stuart, 40.
- 11 Anonymous, IWM 95/9/1, 196.
- 12 IWM 9165 Misc. 116 (Item 1834).
- 13 IWM 9165 Misc. 116 (Item 1834).
- 14 IWM 9165 Misc. 116 (Item 1834).
- 15 Best, 95.
- 16 Pritchard, Interview, 51.
- 17 Ankorn, Interview, 62.
- 18 Pritchard, "the undefeated," 5.
- 19 Allum, "Dear Sir . . .," FEPOW Forum, Christmas Issue, 1956.
- 20 Pritchard, Interview, 70; Ankorn, Interview, 55.
- 21 Pritchard, "the undefeated," 3.
- 22 Wilder, n. p.
- 23 Toosey, 11.
- 24 Pritchard, Interview, 85.
- 25 Ankorn, Interview, 50.
- 26 Summers, 231.
- 27 Pritchard, "the undefeated," 3.
- 28 Ankorn, Interview, 47.
- 29 Pritchard, Interview, 28-29.
- 30 IWM Misc. 116, Item 1834.
- 31 Best, 108.
- 32 Walker, Of Rice, 51.
- 33 Coombes, 140.
- 34 Walker, Of Rice, 51.
- 35 Walker, Of Rice, 51.
- 36 IWM Misc. 116, Item 1834.
- 37 Pritchard, Interview, 51-52.
- 38 Ankorn, Letter to Pritchard, n.d., 3-4.
- 39 Pritchard, Handwritten note on photocopy provided to author.

- 40 Pritchard, Program Collection.
- 41 Freddie Knightley, "Ace's Last Post," unidentified clipping, 1971, 7.
- 42 Pritchard, "the undefeated," 1.
- 43 Best, 100; Baume, 125.
- 44 Best, 100.
- 45 Anckorn, Interview, 54.
- 46 Anckorn, Interview, 54.
- 47 Toosey, 13.
- 48 Toosey, 14.
- 49 IWM Misc. 116, Item 1834.
- 50 Anckorn, E-mail, 20 October 2005.
- 51 All dimensions taken from Wilder's sketch.
- 52 Pritchard, Program Collection.
- 53 Anckorn, Recorded comments on draft, 1
- 54 Adams, 122, 184-185.
- 55 Freddie Knightley, "Ace's Last Post," unidentified clipping, 1971, 7.
- 56 Dewey, Judy & Stuart, 40-41.
- 57 Anckorn, Recorded comments on draft, 3.
- 58 Pritchard, Program Collection.
- 59 Best, 126.
- 60 Best, 140, 103.
- 61 Escritt, in Toosey, 15.
- 62 Anckorn, Recorded comments on draft, 3.
- 63 Anckorn, Hand-written notes on draft, 31.
- 64 Escritt, in Toosey, 15.
- 65 Pritchard, Hand-written notes, n.d.
- 66 Escritt, in Toosey, 16.
- 67 Pritchard, Interview, 14.
- 68 Anckorn, E-mail, 20 October 2005.
- 69 Composite description from Anckorn, Interview, 59, and E-mail, 1 July 2004.
- 70 Program Cover for *Invitation to Murder*, Pritchard Collection.
- 71 Pritchard, Hand-written note accompanying photocopy of program.
- 72 Martin, Letter, n.d.
- 73 Best, 107.
- 74 Best, 108.
- 75 Anckorn, Recorded comments on draft, 5.
- 76 Anckorn, Interview, 64-66.
- 77 Anckorn, Hand-written notes on draft, 31.
- 78 Toosey, 16.
- 79 Pritchard, "the undefeated," 1-2.
- 80 Best, 110.

Visible in the distance from the camp was the gilded, towering Phra Pathom Chedi, the most sacred place in Thailand, marking the site where missionaries from India first taught Buddhism in the kingdom. When Chalker first saw it, he wrote, “this strange and wonderful *chedi* became a symbol of civilized existence for us and I longed to see it more closely.”³

Nakhon Pathom had been partly built by POWs from the nearby camp at Nong Pladuk in former rice paddy fields on the plains about thirty-five miles west of Bangkok. It was bounded on all sides by a slender bamboo stockade. As at Nong Pladuk, the long huts for accommodation had been built of wood with atap roofs and side walls of woven bamboo that contained hinged flaps that could be raised and lowered to let in the light and air. Wood had also been used instead of bamboo for the sleeping platforms and each POW was given a blanket. But this was as far as the Japanese largesse went in outfitting the hospital. Dunlop believed the hospital had been an afterthought on the part of the Japanese and would do many little good.⁴

Besides the POW hospital, the Japanese established a hospital for their own sick at Nakhon Pathom as well. It was separated from the POW compound by a high bamboo fence.

1944

“Without friends in Nakawn Patom a man must surely die”

With its thousands upon thousands of heavy sick and dying, Nakhon Pathom was a dismal place. Entertainment—a critical part of welfare rehabilitation schemes in other hospital camps—was practically nonexistent. Wim Kan, the Dutch cabaret entertainer, had been a patient in Nakhon Pathom since early May, suffering with persistent bouts of malaria. His recovery had been slow, but by 24 June he was giving his humorous theatre lectures in the N.E.I. wards as he had done previously in Burma.⁵ In late June, Chalker recorded a “band practicing” as well as “small lectures permitted” in his diary. But it was not until 7 September that he reported a feeble attempt at a “Band Concert” during which the musicians could only manage to play three or four songs.⁶ A simple platform stage had been built on the edge of the football pitch to accommodate their needs. He also noted there was a full moon that night.⁷

The full moon Chalker mentioned was an auspicious one. That night Allied bombers passed over the camp as they turned toward their target, the nearby supply depot and engineering workshop at Nong Pladuk. Afterward, those POWs severely wounded in the attack were evacuated to Nakhon Pathom for treatment. Two of these were the entertainers Edward “Ted” Ingram and “Akki” (Basil Akhurst). One of the other POWs was Donald Smith. What Smith disliked most about Nakhon Pathom was its pervasive depressing atmosphere:

Try as we would, however, we could not make Nakawn Patom [*sic*] a really happy camp. The huts were comfortable enough, and we had little to do in the way of work. We had a greater supply of washing-water than we had enjoyed in Nong Pladuk, and the food had not deteriorated to any marked extent. But as time went by, more and more sick men arrived in Nakawn Patom from other camps, until finally the whole atmosphere of the place became irksome. There was a lack of purpose in the camp which sapped the prisoners’ strength. Some men even went mad, and had to be lodged in a special hut, barricaded around like a fort. . . .

The days dragged by into weeks, and I thanked God constantly for my friends. Without friends in Nakawn Patom a man must surely die.⁸

Given this horrendous situation, why had no official concert party been organized to restore and sustain morale? There seem to be several reasons why this had not happened. One was the fact that most, if not all, of the POWs were “desperately sick” and had no time, energy, or willpower to organize such strenuous activity.⁹ A second reason may have been that an open-air platform stage during the height of the monsoon season inhibited performances as well as attendance. But the most important reason for the lack of entertainment in Nakhon Pathom had to lie in the policies of the Lieutenant-Colonel Ishii. Ishii was one of those Japanese commandants who did not believe it was appropriate for defeated POWs to be singing and laughing.

The original plan was not to have the POWs at Nakhon Pathom perform any work on military objectives, but following the first bombing raid on Nong Pladuk, those who were able were put to work building a high embankment with a dry moat inside the fence all around the camp.

“What a sing song!”

At some point even Ishii must have been convinced that something had to be done about the dangerously low morale problem in his camp because “light sick” entertainers began to arrive in Nakhon Pathom. On 22 September, Norman Smith, “Fizzer” Pearson, Eric Griffith-Jones, Nigel Wright, and Rob Brazil arrived from Chungkai via the relocation camp at Tamuang. Smith’s assessment of the entertainment situation in Nakhon Pathom was bleak: “There was a grassy area set apart from the huts which looked as though it might have been a football or hockey pitch from the shape and size of it. A stage had been set up at one end but there was nothing in the way of entertainment going on prior to our arrival. We soon remedied this but we didn’t have many performers at first.”¹⁰

As he had done in other places, Smith immediately went to work scouring the camp for musicians to form an orchestra. It would be early December before he had enough performers to form such a group. In the meantime he worked with whomever he found to give small musical presentations, one of whom was Len Gibson (last seen in *Frills & Frolics* at Kinsaiyok in February).

Earlier, Gibson and three other musicians had made an attempt to do something to change the depressing situation—at least for the two hundred men in their hut. Gibson on his camp-made guitar, Alec Hawes on his banjo, and a fiddler named Jameson got together to hold a “jam session” surreptitiously in Gibson’s hut: “The three of us started up with a medley of North Country tunes including ‘Blaydon Races’ and ‘Keep your feet still Geordy Hinnie.’” They immediately drew a crowd of entertainment-starved listeners, and not just from their own hut, but from the huts on either side of them.¹¹

At one stage I looked up and realized that some were on the roof and had lifted up the attap roof tiles so that they could observe the proceedings. What a sing song! What a wealth of willing talent kept the concert going and Jameson was never at a loss to fill in the gaps. The sing-a-long was a great success. In fact, too much of a success, and too loud. We failed to hear Lights Out and continued our raucous singing for an hour or so after. The Japs must have had enough. They

called out the guard and with fixed bayonets charged.¹²

Their audience scattered. Gibson and Jameson were caught and taken to the guardhouse where they were repeatedly slapped and interrogated. The Japanese wanted to know who the third musician had been, but they didn't reveal his name. They were then made to stand outside the guardhouse holding their instruments over their heads, the thinking being that this punishment would make them confess. It didn't. Just before dawn they were released.¹³

Wim Kan was, by now, working as a clerk for a Dutch medical doctor. He continued his humorous theatre lectures in the N.E.I. wards in his free time, and on 26 October gave one of his lectures to the POWs in the insane ward.¹⁴

During the following weeks intermittent attempts at entertainment continued but had little impact on the overall gloomy atmosphere. Jack Chalker explained why it took so long in coming: "It was a difficult time—an enormous population of desperately sick, with the less sick official medical orderlies and helpers stretched to the limit. All of us continued to go down with malaria, dengue and dysentery, but despite this Theatre did emerge, patchy as it was at first."¹⁵

The Nakhon Pathom Concert Party

The I. J. A. Southern Army headquarters in Bangkok must have heard that all was not well in their highly touted "model" hospital camp at Nakhon Pathom, for on 1 December, Colonel Ishii was replaced by Group II commandant Lieutenant-Colonel Shouichi Yanagida, who was presently at Tamarkan. As he had done earlier in Takanun and Chungkai, Yanagida immediately set to work tackling the low morale problem in the camp. One of his first acts was to authorize a concert party and to have a proper theatre built.

From a close examination of a ground plan and setting designed for a show that took place in this new theatre in mid-February, we know that this theatre had a stagehouse with side and rear walls. It probably had a proscenium arch as well. But it did not have a roof. Robert Brazil, who designed the setting, pointed out that if it rained the setting had to be painted over again.¹⁶ With no permission given for artificial lighting, daylight would light the stage. The new Nakhon Pathom theatre would, therefore, resemble the first theatre at Chungkai and Nong Pladuk.

Lieutenant-Colonel William MacFarlane, Royal Army Medical Corps, was appointed Officer in Charge—Entertainments with the task of forming a concert party. He immediately set about locating would-be producers and a staff who could provide design and technical support for his theatre. Chalker remembered that it was not MacFarlane but the former Malayan geneticist "Nigel [Wright] and others [who] seemed to be the centre of influence and decision with Theatre matters."¹⁷ MacFarlane's responsibilities were administrative; individual show producers were responsible for the artistic side of things. This division would be fine as long as each respected the purviews and prerogatives of the other, but when those lines were crossed, there would be problems, as we shall see.

When violinist Henk Eskes and guitarist Jimmy van Lingen arrived in Nakhon Pathom along with other N.E.I. entertainers, Norman Smith's new "edition" of his "Melody Makers" orchestra became a reality. His ensemble now consisted of "4 violins, 2 trumpets, 1 clarinet, 2 guitars, bass, banjo and drums," which allowed him to intensify his "efforts in giving concerts and arranging small parties to sing and play in the hospital huts."¹⁸ Gibson remembered most of who these "Melody Makers" were:

The violinists were Captain [“Tug”] Wilson, Eskes and Sanderson.ⁱ The clarinetist was Captain Martin of the East Surry Regiment. The percussion was supplied by Captain Wheeler of the 148 Field Regiment. The two trumpeters were a Russian named Tebneff and an Australian. A Javanese called Jimmy Van Lingden [*sic*] played guitar and there was a banjo player known to all as Sinbad.ⁱⁱ

On the railway, Gibson had been part of an instrumental trio as well as a female impersonator in Charles Woodhams’ shows. This was the first time he had performed with professionally trained musicians.

Playing in the band was a challenge. I had taught myself the chords and this was the test. We gave regular concerts playing to large audiences. There was a good tenor who sang semi-classical songs and we had solos from different members of the orchestra. Eskes was a huge Dutchman who had broadcast and most of the others were professional musicians who had played in well known orchestras. [Nicholai Philippe] Tebneff had been a cadet in the White Russian Army. He had played in the band and when driven out during the revolution had to resort to playing for a living in Hong Kong. He became a British Citizen.ⁱⁱⁱ

Jimmy Van Lingden [*sic*] was a good guitarist with an excellent ear for chords. He was a small man and had a huge home-made guitar which he handled with expertise.

Sinbad was really Petty Officer Alec Hawes. He had a dark beard and always reminded me of the sailor on the front of the old Players cigarette packet.¹⁹

Another of the newly arrived N.E.I. entertainers was, in Smith’s eyes at least, “an extremely good-looking Javanese [who] could dance beautifully and was even more handsome dressed as a woman.”²⁰ Both Chalker and Gibson called this performer “Sambal Susie”—but this had become the standard Anglo-Aussie nickname for any of the sexy Dutch/Indonesian female impersonators in the camps. It was American POW Benjamin Dunn who confirmed the performer’s identification as Vilhelm Vanderdeken, the female impersonator who had starred in Norman Carter’s concert party productions back in Bicycle Camp on Java in 1942. “‘Sambal Sue’ always played the part of an exotic woman—and a good looking one,” he wrote. “A lot of guys whistled at him and he seemed not to mind. He even had a big Dutch boyfriend who was with him constantly.”²¹

Three former entertainers from Chungkai—Bob Monkhouse, Van der Cruysen, and “Lovely” Dunning—also surfaced among the patients in Nakhon Pathom and joined the concert party.

Musical Intelligence

Nakhon Pathom held a secret. It wasn’t only a POW hospital camp as the Japanese authorities had told the Red Cross in Bangkok. Inside the larger hospital camp was a very special restricted compound

ⁱ Jameson would have been the fourth violinist.

ⁱⁱ Norman Smith would have been the second guitarist.

ⁱⁱⁱ He was a member of the Straits Settlement Volunteer Forces Brigade.

reserved for the thousands of captured Indian soldiers who had been in the British Indian Army. They had refused to renounce their allegiance to Great Britain and join with the Japanese as members of the Indian National Army (I.N.A.). The POW administration believed that it was vitally important that they make contact with their commanding officer and thought this might be accomplished while one of their entertainment groups performed for the Indian soldiers. The Japanese, suspecting such a ruse, steadfastly refused to allow the band or the concert party inside the compound.

But when Len Gibson and several of his musician friends, who had formed a singing group calling themselves “5 boys and 6 strings,” asked the Japanese for permission to perform inside the Indian soldiers’ compound, the Japanese “listened to us and decided that we could do no harm.”²²

On the day of their scheduled visit, a British officer who had been in the Indian Army joined them as a member of their group. “It was ludicrous,” Gibson wrote. “Those poor Indians most of whom could speak no English sat while we sang such songs as, ‘The Boogie Woggy [*sic*^{iv}] Bugle Boy from Company B.’” While they played and sang, the British officer got to exchange vital information with the Indian C.O. under the watchful eyes of the Japanese.²³

On 3 December, there was an air raid drill as Allied bombers targeted Nong Pladuk once again.²⁴ As before, those severely wounded in the attack were evacuated to Nakhon Pathom for treatment.

Wim Kan’s Comeback

Wim Kan had continued to give his humorous theatre lectures in the N.E.I. hospital wards. By early December he felt strong enough to organize some other Dutch/Indonesian performers and put on a cabaret—his first cabaret since Burma days—for St. Nicholas Day, 5 December. At the top of the bill as usual, Kan sang a number of songs, such as “Fairy Tales,” “Disasters, Treasures and Happiness,” and “That One Needs to Go into the Sack.”²⁵

This last song was a reference to the hemp bag St. Nicholas’ servant Piet carried to put naughty children in before carrying them off to Spain.²⁶ (It wouldn’t be surprising to learn that Kan’s version contained some pointed reference that it was time for the Japanese to be placed “in the bag.”) During the performance there were complaints from the Japanese that the audience’s laughter was too loud, so they toned it down and kept going.²⁷ Kan and his troupe repeated their cabaret on four separate occasions in the N.E.I. hospital wards.

On 8 December, the POWs were finally allowed to dig slit trenches for their protection during any bombing raid, even though the I. J. A. assured them the Red Cross had been notified that Nakhon Pathom was a POW hospital camp.²⁸ In fact, the large sprawling camp, clearly visible from the air in its former paddy fields, was never bombed. What really struck fear in the hearts of the POW administration instead was the sudden increase in surprise searches by the Japanese guards. Worried that their secret radio and contact with the Thai underground would be discovered, on 11 December, Colonel Sainter ordered their “dickey-bird” [secret radio] be “killed and buried as unhealthy and the men concerned [in operating it] to leave the camp.”²⁹

A Special Christmas

After the success of his cabaret, Kan started rehearsing with Henk Eskes and Jimmy van Lingem for Christmas and New Year’s shows in which he planned to sing some of his old Burma songs, such as

^{iv} A Freudian slip here.

“Normal and Abnormal” and “Christmas Letter.”



FIGURE 8.2. POSTER FOR DUTCH CHRISTMAS SHOWS.
H. FRANZ, COURTESY OF NIOD.

As the colorful poster for the Dutch Christmas celebrations indicates, plans were made to perform brief twenty-minute shows in four different sick wards, as well as for the TB patients and the insane. But a notice pasted on the poster in the lower left corner informs the reader that these plans were cancelled as Kan had been taken ill.³⁰ He had suffered a relapse of malaria and was sent back into hospital.³¹

Meanwhile, Smith and Pearson were preparing an original Christmas pantomime to open the new theatre. In the more accommodating atmosphere under Yanagida, the orchestra had help acquiring worn-out reeds for their wind instruments, horsehair for the violin bows, and strings for their violins and guitars from a concerned Japanese medical orderly who traveled to Bangkok on his days off and asked if he could help them with their equipment needs.³²

Also contributing to the revitalization of camp morale was Chief Medical Officer Coates' request that every POW in hospital receive something special in the way of a gift on Christmas morning. John Barnard, a member of Coates' staff, was one of those assigned to fulfill this request: "[W]e were able to make up a small parcel of cigarettes, soap and toothpowder for everyone. I even managed to obtain paints and make-up for the artists on the theatre staff."³³ A gift of another kind was a special touring show that traveled the camp on Christmas Eve and visited all the hospital wards on Christmas Day. It included "a Father Christmas, a Lord Mayor, two beautiful film stars and, of course, a fat man^{vi} [who] toured the whole camp . . . and visited those prisoners of war who were sick and unable to attend to attend the shows," wrote Ted Ingram. "The crowning performance was given beneath a blue sky and a scorching sun to the one and

^v Perhaps the most unusual assignment for Norman Smith and his orchestra during this time was playing for another of Yanagida's new camp "shape-up" schemes—a physical education program—that was initiated on 20 December. Gibson recalled that "Norman Smith was given an eight-bar Nipponese tune and the band had to play this over and over again. A Dutch POW, ex-school teacher, led these exercises from the top of a raised platform" [Gibson, *Memoir*, 11]. Down below on the parade ground, exercising with the troops, was Jack Chalker, who remembered that "occasionally the orchestra jazzed up the music Glen Miller-style, much to our delight" [Chalker, *BRA*, 106].

^{vi} As best Chalker can remember, this "fat man" was some sort of clown.

only leper case, who, although isolated from everybody, still received his own special Christmas greetings from the players.”³⁴

On Christmas Day itself, there was a race meeting midafternoon, followed by an “Open-air Concert (Band) at 5:30 p.m.” Later, at 9 p.m., a huge audience was seated on the ground in front of the new theatre for the premiere of Smith and Pearson’s pantomime, *Alf’s Ring*.^{vii35} With such a late starting time, Yanagida—assured that no Allied bombing raid would take place on Christmas Day—may have given approval for the use of artificial lighting.

We know very little about the content of this panto, except it included guitar duets between Norman Smith and Jimmy von Lingen; a sketch in which Jack Chalker played a vicar’s daughter once again, this time with Derek Hirsch as “Daddy”^{viii}; and an unnamed colonel with “a pleasant tenor voice,” who gave “a recital of settings of poems of A. E. Houseman [sic].”^{ix36}

This show marks Jack Chalker’s first appearance on stage since his brief stint at Chungkai. Besides his important work in remedial therapy and medical illustration, Chalker now became heavily involved in the shows as a performer and also behind the scenes in costume design and construction.

Following the performance, Smith and Pearson were invited to a party in Colonel Coates’ quarters. But after one taste of the colonel’s home-made brew, Smith excused himself, saying, “[he] had to finish some new arrangements for the repeat performance of the pantomime on Boxing Day [the next day].” But Pearson remained. In the middle of the night Smith awoke to find Pearson’s bed empty and went on a search for him. He found him in the cookhouse, “standing naked on the floor . . . being sluiced down by two of the cooks who had dragged him out of the cesspit where all the garbage was dumped.”³⁷ The inebriated “Fizzer” had lost his balance on his way to the latrine and fallen into a cesspit. As a dedicated performer, Pearson knew that “the show must go on,” and though he was “a bit under the weather,” he did not disappoint his Boxing Day audience.³⁸

One N.E.I. POW, Cornelius Evers, voiced his appreciation about all the Christmas offerings the prisoners had enjoyed: “Thanks to the presence of Wim Kan, our 1944 Christmas was the best we had as POW. A Casuarina tree had been rigged up and decorated as a Christmas-tree. Christmas carols were allowed to be sung and the various cabaret shows and pantomimes, put on by the prisoners, almost made us forget the strained circumstances under which we were living.”³⁹

1945

“Renewed Hopes”

Wim Kan’s anticipated appearance with Norman Smith’s “Melody Makers” on New Year’s Eve (that had also been announced on the Christmas poster) did not take place as he was still bed-down in hospital; nevertheless, there was music and singing, “with as much celebration as our meager circumstances would allow,” recalled Chalker, “and once more a year began with renewed hopes.”⁴⁰ He thought Christmas 1944 the “most enjoyable camp Christmas we had known.”⁴¹

With these holiday shows, entertainment became a regular weekly feature of camp life eagerly awaited by the men.^x After two repeat performances of the Christmas pantomime in early January, the next

vii Chalker identifies the pantomime’s title as Fizz Number One [Chalker, “War Diary extracts,” Sheet 3].

viii He had appeared with “Fizzer” Pearson in this sketch back in Chungkai.

ix Given these acts, it seems more likely that the first half of the show was a variety show and the second half was the pantomime.

x Benjamin Dunn claimed that there were separate British, Australian, and Dutch concert parties at Nakhon Pathom, but no reference has been found to an Australian concert party separate from the British. Since our main sources of information on the entertainment at Nakhon Pathom are Wim Kan’s and Jack Chalker’s diaries, the record of entertainment is somewhat spotty because when they were “indisposed”—back in hospital—there are gaps in their accounts. Variety shows with no producer attribution could very well have been Australian [Dunn, 139].

major production of the Nakhon Pathom concert party took place on 12 January. This was the performance of three one-act comedies, *Hayseed*, *Smack at the Blacks*, and *Baba Barbary*, directed by Nigel Wright.⁴² Wright now became the British producer-director for dramatic works in Nakhon Pathom.



FIGURE 8.3. SKETCH OF NIGEL WRIGHT. JACK CHALKER.
COURTESY OF JACK CHALKER.

Chalker became a close friend of Wright's and drew this sketch of him. "We had amongst us a most capable and cultured man," he recalled, "a geneticist from Kuala Lumpur, who had lived in Malaya for many years, had set up a theatre group there and was an experienced actor and producer."⁴³

On 16 January the high embankment and interior moat around the camp were completed. What was worrying about this new construction was the fact that machine gun emplacements had been strategically located at the four corners of the embankment—facing in. Dunn believed this was done "for the purpose of keeping the prisoners from escaping in Thailand where many of the natives were quite friendly to us."⁴⁴ Fear of a breakout may have been one reason for the machine gun positions, but the POWs would eventually discover that there was another, more sinister, reason as well. Air raids occurred again that night.

On 19 January, three more one-act comedies directed by Nigel Wright were performed. These were A. A. Milne's play *The Boy Comes Home*, about a soldier's return from the First World War, Noel Coward's *Ways and Means*, and Stanley Houghton's *The Dear Departed*. Chalker and Brazil designed the sets.^{x145} Ken Adams played the leading female role of Olive in *Ways and Means*; Chalker, the part of "Masie, the maid" in *The Boy Comes Home*.^{xii} When the plays were repeated a week later, Adams must have been "indisposed," as Chalker took over the role of Olive in *Way and Means* as well.⁴⁶

"Fizzer" Pearson did not perform in these one-act plays as he had done earlier in Chungkai. On 23 January, he, along with other nonessential officers, was sent to the newly established all-officers' camp at Kanburi. But Norman Smith was not included in this draft. He may have been in hospital suffering from

^{x1} Wright had previously directed Milne's and Houghton's plays in Chungkai.

^{xii} There is no "Masie" in *The Boy Comes Home*. The maid's name in the script is Mary.

another bout of amoebic dysentery, although that did not prevent other officers who were too sick to be moved from being transferred. Smith could only have been held back with approval from the top.

New Faces

On 9 February, a new Dutch/Indonesian concert party gave their first show in Nakhon Pathom. We know little about this group, but what we do know is that Wim Kan was not part of it as he was still in hospital recovering from his latest bout of malaria. There was also a band concert on 9 February, but with Smith “indisposed,” Thomas Gray, A.R.C.M.,^{xiii} took over as the conductor.⁴⁷

During the next two weeks, audiences at Nakhon Pathom were treated to “A Musical Extravaganza”: *Greenwood Fantasy: A Tale of the Rhythmical Rascals of Richard’s Reign*, written in rhymed couplets by Francis Leslie and John Maddox. It starred Rob Brazil as Robin Hood and Ken Cornish Cornish as Maid Marion. Brazil thought Cornish “looked a ravishing young lady.”⁴⁸



FIGURES 8.4 AND 8.5 SOUVENIR PROGRAM COVERS FOR *GREENWOOD FANTASY*. PHILIP MENINSKY. COURTESY OF ROBERT BRAZIL AND JACK CHALKER.

Philip Meninsky produced two different souvenir programs for the show. Among the many handwritten congratulations to Brazil from the cast on the inside of one of these are two couplets written in rhyme: a playfully suggestive one by “Merry Maid ‘Edward’” that reads, “Some call him Robin Good Fellow / I call him _____”; and the other, by W. G. Gillan, the actor who played the Sheriff, that charges, “I sought to kill you, Robin Hood / But now you’ve got me ‘in the mood’”—which sounds like a music cue, if you ever heard one.

Brazil was very proud of his work in this production:

I sung (or Robin Hood did) “Up a lazy river,” which went like this:

^{xiii} Associate of the Royal College of Music.

“Up a lazy river by the old mill run,
That lazy, lazy river in the noonday sun. . . .^{xiv}

Which makes reference (and a bit of a joke) to the River Kwai not very far away.⁴⁹

Besides starring in the show, Brazil also designed the unit set (see his ground plan and design for this setting in Chapter 12: “Jolly Good Show!”). A unit set was perfect for the limitations of their theatre. It allowed all the action of the play to take place in a single setting that could be easily rearranged or redecorated to suggest various locales.

Camp Update

At the same time that life in Nakhon Pathom with its steady supply of entertainment was becoming more livable, it was also, paradoxically, becoming more un-livable. Since mid-February there had been an increase in the number of air raids and, in consequence, an increase in the surprise checks that took place in the men’s huts day and night by I. J. A. guards searching for the secret radio they believed was transmitting signals guiding the Allied bombers.⁵⁰

A New Theatre

The big event at Nakhon Pathom in March was the opening of a new and bigger theatre, built, as the old one had been, on the edge of the football pitch.⁵¹



FIGURE 8.6. NAKHON PATHOM THEATRE. G. VOORNEMAN. COURTESY NIOD.

This new theatre, seen here in a watercolor by G. Voorneman, was a great improvement over

^{xiv} A Fats Waller song whose style Brazil liked to imitate.

their previous one because it allowed more flexibility in staging. It not only had a full proscenium-arched stagehouse but, in anticipation of the coming monsoon season, a pitched roof. No longer would the scenery have to be repainted if it rained. On the left side of the roof was a large hinged skylight—very like the “window flaps” in the men’s huts—which could be propped up to let the afternoon sun illuminate the upstage areas. Under the slant of the new wide roof were off-stage spaces as well as a backstage work area. Front curtains made out of woven mats were suspended from a pair of bamboo poles that allowed them to slide open and closed. The production that opened this theatre on 4 March was a “Naval Revue” entitled *All At Sea*. It was repeated a week later, followed on 18 March by a band concert.

On 23 March, P. G. Wodehouse’s comedy *Good Morning Bill*, produced and directed by Nigel Wright, opened for a two-week run. Wright had produced the play in Kuala Lumpur prior to the war and had made up this version from memory. Like all the prisoners’ scripts, it was “written out on scraps of paper largely stolen from the Japanese compound and the bits sewn together with salvaged cotton or wool thread.”⁵² Ken Adams, in the leading female role of Sally, played opposite Jack Chalker as the flapper Lottie. Costumes were by the Dutchman Fritz Meyer.

Chalker knew the play well. He had previously appeared as the maid Marie in Pearson’s production of the comedy in Chungkai. A brief excerpt from Act III in Chalker’s handwritten copy of the script will give an idea of the type of light comedy and cheeky roles that Chalker was good at. In this scene, the gold-digger, Lottie, has just been bribed by Sir Hugo with two thousand pounds sterling to give up any idea of marrying his nephew, Bill. As Sir Hugo leaves, Bill’s friend, the vacuous but filthy rich—and presently unattached—Tid, enters and learns from Lottie that she is not going to marry Bill after all. As the following dialogue indicates, she now sets her sights on Tid.



FIGURE 8.7. EXCERPT FROM *GOOD MORNING BILL*. COURTESY OF JACK CHALKER.

Stage directions call for the two characters to kiss—twice!—always a source of titillation as well as barracking in the audience. But it was nothing compared to the “stunning reception from the audience” Ken Adams received when he appeared onstage in a real pair of women’s silk cami-knickers.⁵³ (Read how these “unmentionables” were acquired in Chapter 12: “Jolly Good Show!”)

Ken Adams, who had first become a female impersonator in Charles Woodhams’ shows in Kinsaiyok, now became the major British female impersonator for “glamour” roles in Nakhon Pathom. Chalker described his appearance: “In looks he was taller and more heavily built than Bobby Spong and with a less immediate female face, but made up well and assumed female movement and voice pitch well. . . . Adams had a good sense of humour and took the ragging well that went on in a good-hearted way.”⁵⁴

Chalker himself became the choice for perky ingénue and feisty soubrette roles. Lieutenant Fred “Smudger” Smith, who designed sets and built props for the productions, remembered Jack as “a handsome chap with an aquiline nose & slim with quite a head of hair!”⁵⁵ Dunlop likened him to a young Rupert Brooke.⁵⁶ With his slender build and good looks, Jack Chalker finally broke free of his earlier resistance to performing as a female impersonator and quickly became one of the most sought-after players in camp. “It was great fun and the pleasure for me in doing it was in its barmy humour and burlesque,” he wrote, “as well as the challenge for all of us in making the almost impossible work. We were lucky—this helped us to survive, but with pleasure in doing it as a team.”⁵⁷

“Monsoon”

Earlier in the month, Len Gibson had started work on a challenging new musical venture. The coming monsoon season had reminded him of a guitar composition he had written two years earlier while working on the railway. He was now attempting to re-score it for Norman Smith’s orchestra.

At Wampo I had experimented with chords and rhythms trying to describe the coming of the rainy season. I was fascinated by the changes in the creatures of the forest; how they sensed the coming of the rain, and how the gentle breeze cooled us before lashing us with the torrent it carried. Sitting round the camp fire the lads would often ask me to play “Jungle.” I decided to rename it “Monsoon” and write it as an orchestral piece.

Before Norman Smith arrived at rehearsals I would take the opportunity to put a piece in front of some of the band and ask if they would play it to see what it sounded like. In time I had the orchestration complete.

It was with great trepidation that I handed out parts to unsuspecting players and had the temerity to say, “Please come in after the count of four.” I was not only the youngest but also the only amateur, but the band responded really well.

Norman Smith had heard the whole thing but kept out of the way until it was finished. He not only approved but rewrote all the band parts on good paper.⁵⁸

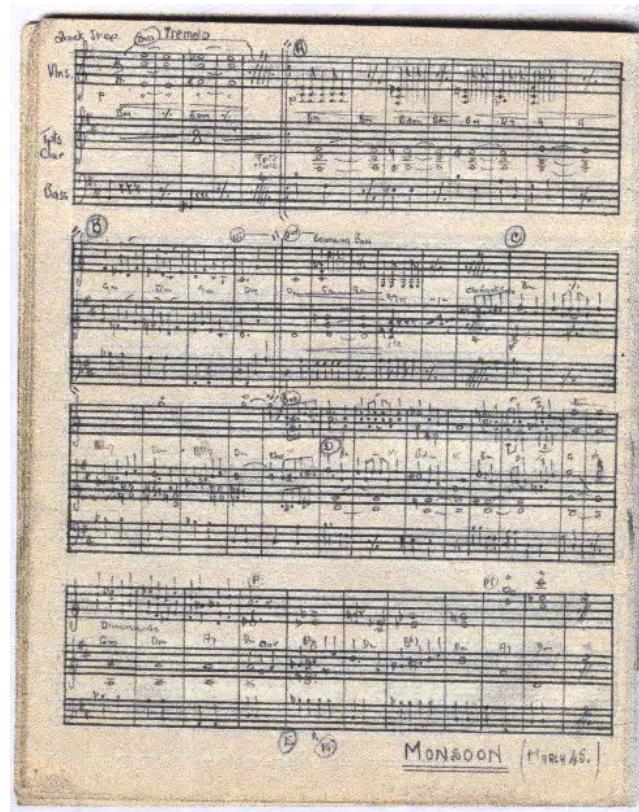


FIGURE 8.8. LEN GIBSON'S SCORE FOR "MONSOON." COURTESY OF LEN GIBSON.

[To hear an electronic realization of "Monsoon," listen to **Audio Link 8.1**]

Audio



8.1

Throughout the rest of his time as a POW, Gibson was able to preserve his precious copy of the score Smith had transcribed for him. "A vital part is missing [from the score]," Gibson wrote: "The Percussion so much depended upon the cymbals and drums for the storm climax, and the rhythm section for the repetitive beat."^{xv59}

Smith included Gibson's "Monsoon" in the next concert, on 3 April, and following its performance asked Gibson to stand up and take a bow.⁶⁰ This concert proved to be Norman Smith's swan song in Nakhon Pathom. As he had now recovered from his latest bout with dysentery sufficiently enough to conduct a concert, he was deemed fit enough to join the other officers at Kanburi.

During the next week there was a variety show (Australian?) and a daylight air raid that occurred during the noontime lunch break on 9 April. As a result, security around the camp was doubled. But it did not prevent the band concert from taking place that day, or the opening two days later of the musical revue

^{xv} Gibson followed this statement with a sketch of whole and half notes.

Café Continental, in which Chalker played Julia Gibson, the leading female role, alongside Nigel Wright, Bill Mercer, Bob Monkhouse, and Van der Cruysen. Chalker had now become a “hot property.” At the same time he was starring in *Café Continental*, he had started rehearsals for the comedy-thriller *The Two Mrs. Carrolls* and continued as a soloist with the band.⁶¹

At least one member of that band would soon be missing: Len Gibson. POWs who had recovered from their illnesses were constantly being sent back up the railway on maintenance parties. Some entertainers, it appears, were not exempt from these drafts. But Gibson and a group of other “fit” POWs were not sent back up the line but down the Bangkok-Maylaya Railroad Line to the new Mergui Road construction project on the Kra Peninsula. This road was being built by the Japanese as an alternative to the Thailand-Burma railway that was under constant attack by Allied bombers, in anticipation of their army’s retreat from Burma. During its construction, the POWs there would relive their worst “Speedo” experiences on the railway. Once again Gibson would do what he could in the circumstances to provide music to keep his own, and the other POWs’, morale high (see Chapter 11: “Out of the Blue Came Freedom”).

Wim Kan’s Break Out

On 13 April, the Dutch concert party returned to the Nakhon Pathom stage with a performance of Agatha Christie’s murder mystery *Ten Kline Negajes* (*Ten Little Niggers*).^{xvi} Wim Kan was not involved with this production either. While recovering in hospital he had decided on a new artistic venture for himself: playwrighting. Breaking out of his role as a cabaret producer-performer-songwriter, Kan started writing a series of plays, the first of which would be the comedy *Roland ons kind* (*Roland Our Child*).

The repeat of *Ten Kline Negajes* a week later was cancelled due to heavy monsoon rains, but a reprise of *Café Continental* was able to take place a week later, followed the next evening by *Cosmopolitan Way*, a band show, in which Chalker also appeared in a “Tea for Two” duet with medical officer Captain “Pop” Vardy. “Vardy was a popular and delightful man,” Chalker recalled, “and this was his first venture on stage to which the audience reacted with jeers and cat calls at his first appearance, and was great fun.” Another revival of *Café Continental* took place on 4 May.⁶²

After Kan completed the first act of *Roland ons kind*, he showed it to some Dutch friends and was taken aback when they criticized him for employing too highbrow a grammar and diction in the play.^{xvii} When he went to see Colonel MacFarlane, the entertainments officer, for permission to present his play, he heard criticism about another Dutch language issue. Complaints had been filed about the Dutch concert party’s use of their own language in their shows—particularly in their recent production of *Ten Kline Negajes*—as it prevented the British and Australians from enjoying the shows. So instead of receiving permission to produce his play, Kan met resistance. When he promised to present an English-language version of *Roland* two weeks after its production in Dutch, MacFarlane gave him permission to go ahead.⁶³

Noises Off: The Wider War

In early May, the British recaptured Rangoon, Burma, from the Japanese. On the other side of the world, 8 May was the day the Germans surrendered. The war in Europe was now over. At what point

^{xvi} Known as *Ten Little Indians* in the American version.

^{xvii} In an email to the author (24 June 2010), Dutch translator Margie Bellamy explained what Kan meant: “Like in England, the way you speak the native language in Holland defines which social class you belong to. . . and the cream of the crop went to Lyceum which combined Gymnasium (Latin, Greek in curriculum) and HBS [higher education]—these schools were for those classes which could think of/afford college education which is still only private in Holland. The difference in language is not only pronunciation, but grammar and choice of words.” By choosing this grammar and diction, Kan was indicating his characters’ social class. That he had chosen to write a comedy about characters of this class must have surprised his friends.

the POWs in Nakhon Pathom learned about these major events is uncertain since their secret radio was no longer in operation. And Dunlop's diary is no help here because there is another huge gap in it between 3 January and 6 July. But one can assume that contact with their underground network was still operating and the POWs in Nakhon Pathom did receive this heartening news.

“Trouble in the Works”

In Nakhon Pathom, Kan started rehearsing his comedy, although he had been hesitant about being a theatre director. Having seen Chalker perform, Kan asked him to play a walk-on role as a young English woman in *Roland*. He accepted.⁶⁴ But Kan soon discovered that rehearsing *Roland* every evening was tiring. He also realized that he had written a very difficult play for amateurs to perform. Nevertheless, warming to his newfound role as playwright, he began work on a second play, a one-act piece, *De Oude Mevrouw Duister* (*The Old Mrs. Duister*).⁶⁵

As the rehearsals for *Roland* continued, Kan began to experience difficulties with Frits Meyers, the actor he had cast as his leading lady—“Big misery with Frits Meyer. Endless, nearly impossible to untangle questions”—which forced Kan to consider a casting change. His decision was complicated by the fact that Meyers was also in charge of costuming. Nevertheless, he did what any producer-director has to do for the good of the show: “Result that Frits is thrown out of everything by me—much against my liking. . . . Lugt will now play Frits’ role in *Roland*. Leeuwenberg, Jack Chalker, and Baar will look after the costumes. I wonder how that will pan out. Working on a new ending for *Mrs. Duister*.”⁶⁶

The Two Mrs. Carrolls Incident

Elsewhere in camp, rehearsals were under way for a production of Martin Vale's 1935 mystery-thriller *The Two Mrs. Carrolls*. Back in April, Entertainments Officer “Bill” MacFarlane had decided to produce a show himself, and he had written out Vale's play entirely from memory. It was an extraordinary choice as five of the eight roles in the play were for women, which, in this case of course, had to be played by five female impersonators. And MacFarlane had taken the producer's prerogative of casting the show himself without consulting the director, Nigel Wright. Ken Adams was to play the leading role of Harriet Carroll while John Davis (Sally Carroll), Jack Chalker (Cecily Burn), “Lovely” Dunning (Mrs. Pennington), and Ted Ingram (Clemence, the maid) played the rest. He cast himself as the male lead. Nigel Wright and Bill Mercer would play the other male roles.

But with *The Two Mrs. Carrolls*, egos and jealousies long kept in check finally gave way and tensions now surfaced within the British concert party as well. Chalker recorded the unfortunate incident:

Some of us will never forget the occasion when a high-ranking British medical officer, unbeknown to his colleagues, put a sick man on an up-country [maintenance] party for railway work out of jealousy for his outstanding capabilities as an actor and producer in the camp theatre. The officer concerned fancied himself as a playwright and his action against this gentle, erudite English scientist was incomprehensible.⁶⁷

Though Chalker carefully avoids naming names, it is not difficult to figure out who the people

involved in this pathetic incident were. What the conflict was about is not explained, although the charge, “fancied himself a playwright” suggests that it may have been with the script as MacFarlane remembered it. As a seasoned theatrical producer-director in Kuala Lumpur before the war, Wright may well have known the original and charged that MacFarlane’s memory of it was faulty. Chalker’s account continues: “The action was discovered by a medical orderly who knew that the victim was a friend of mine and I reported it in turn to our senior Australian doctors who were distressed and angered and at once took the name off the work-party list.”⁶⁸

The “senior Australian doctors” mentioned by Chalker would have been Albert Coates and Weary Dunlop. When the “officer in question” learned what Chalker had done, he confronted Chalker and threatened to put him on a charge for insulting a senior officer. Being the feisty person that he was, Chalker responded that he “would ask for a court-martial in the event of our surviving the camps and that I would consider it a duty to ensure that his despicable action was officially investigated.”⁶⁹

The Two Mrs. Carrolls was scheduled to open on 18 May when suddenly all shows were cancelled by the Japanese “owing to bad saluting: for 1 wk they were told!”⁷⁰ This meant the show would only have a one-week run instead of the intended two. As further punishment for the “bad saluting” incident, a temporary ban was placed on all rehearsals, totally upsetting final rehearsals for *Carrolls* as well as Wim Kan’s carefully planned schedule for *Roland*. A week later, a frustrated Kan wrote in his diary, “rehearsals still not permitted.”⁷¹

Once the ban was lifted, *The Two Mrs. Carrolls* went on with no further complications, although the atmosphere backstage must have been frosty. Chalker designed the stylish women’s costumes for this production (see Chapter 12: “Jolly Good Show!” for examples of his costume designs and comments on their construction).

Hopes and Fears

With the lifting of the ban, Kan’s rehearsals resumed: “*Roland* again in the bakery!” he wrote in his diary, “Lugt practiced Lola. Not too bad, but he thinks it’s a chore!”⁷² Kan then added three intriguing notes to his entry: (1) that they were having lots of thunderstorms at night, (2) that the stage was being moved, and (3) that there were “endless difficulties” in the concert party.⁷³

The monsoon rains worried Kan because they could force a delay, or even a cancellation, of his show. Heavy rain also must have been the reason for the movement of the stage away from the edge of the football pitch to a spot where audience seating would be less muddy. But whatever the reason, it temporarily put an end to all the entertainments in camp until it could reopen.^{xviii}

Operating on faith, Kan continued his rehearsals, and an air of excitement pervades his diary entry for 10 June as his production neared its opening night:

We rehearse *Roland* every day; 3rd act especially good. Nice poster drawn by Jack Chalker. Hope to save it (light blue). Friday, one week from now, *Roland* has to open. Maybe the performance will be in the afternoon at 3:30. No rehearsals on the stage! It is getting more and more difficult. We miss Frits, but fortunately Lugt turns out quite okay. Rain every afternoon. The Englishman (Nigel Wright and others) often view my rehearsals.⁷⁴

^{xviii} We don’t know whether the “endless difficulties” Kan mentions refer to those in his concert party or those in the British one.

And just as things were finally going along well once more, calamity struck. The stage on which they were to perform was suddenly no more. As it was being transported to its new location, it must have disintegrated in the heavy rains. So, “in haste,” Kan wrote, “a new stage is built.”⁷⁵ But this meant that the opening of *Roland* had to be delayed until 23 June. Then Kan learned that the new structure was not going to be ready on the expected date, so the opening of *Roland* had to be postponed once again, this time until the twenty-ninth. This delay would mean that *Roland* would only have a one-week run.

In the midst of his mounting frustrations, Kan started writing a new play, *Maatje Visser Helderziende* (*Maatje Visser, Clairvoyant*), which he characterized as “nearly a farce.”⁷⁶ Working hard during the next few days, he completed most of it. His anxiety about the opening of *Roland* (“Come hell or high water, Roland has to open on Friday at 3:30”) was finally relieved when the new theatre was completed ahead of schedule on 25 June. He was thrilled with the new structure: “The Japs gave us a beautiful new stage. With dressing rooms and all—nearly more beautiful than the Leidseplein Theatre”^{xix77}

Also thrilled with this new theatre was Jack Chalker, who described it in more detail: “Though less picturesque in its setting [than] Chungkai, it was a more sophisticated structure built of bamboo and atap on a raised platform, with a shallow orchestra pit and equipped with dressing rooms, ample wings, and a drop-curtain of bamboo and ‘flies’ operated by ropes made of stolen hemp.”^{xx78}

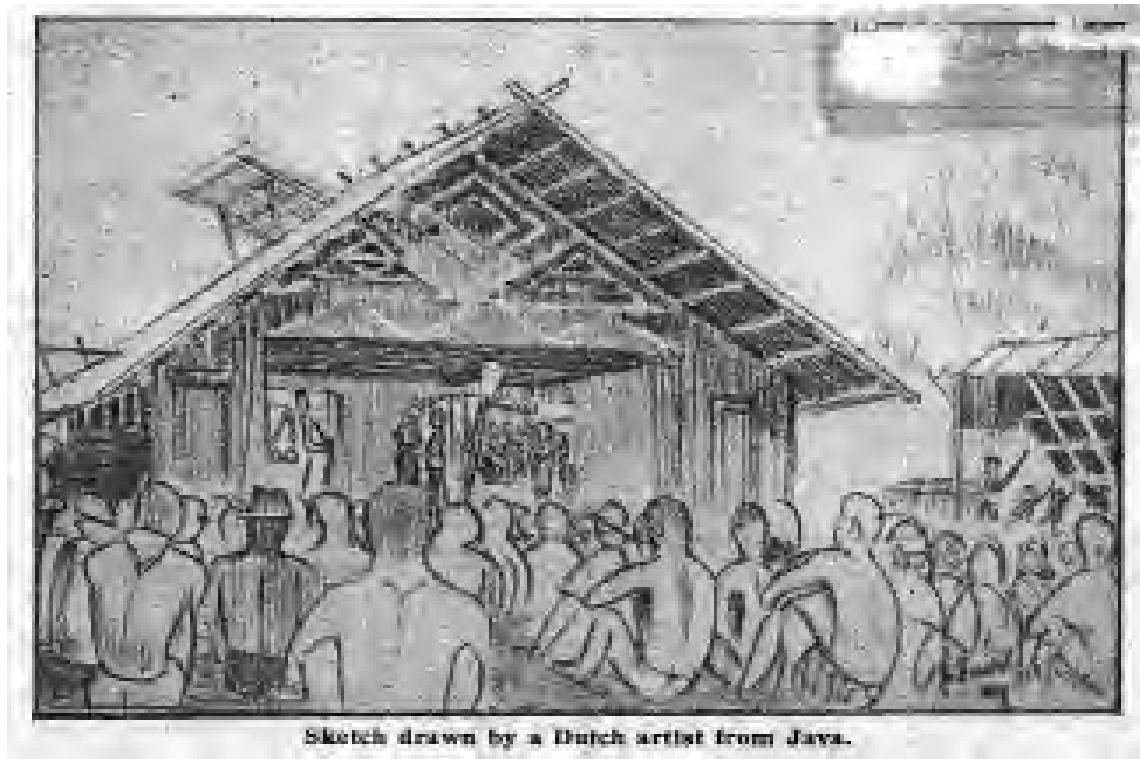


FIGURE 8.9. SKETCH OF NEW NAKHON PATHOM THEATRE BY UNKNOWN DUTCH ARTIST FROM INGRAM'S "PADDY FIELD PLAYHOUSE."

A sketch by an unidentified Dutch artist shows this “beautiful new stage.”⁷⁹ The pitch of the roof

^{xix} The Leidseplein Theatre was a small, beautiful theatre in Amsterdam. Kan's comment, “the Japs gave us,” probably doesn't mean that the Japanese actually built the theatre, but that they had provided the materials with which to build it.

^{xx} Chalker had apparently forgotten about the capabilities of the Chungkai theatre.

is now higher, which allowed a grid—visible in the sketch—to be installed so that small scenery pieces and drop curtains could be raised and lowered from the flies. The open skylight in the roof is clearly visible. Handsome diamond-shaped designs have been woven into the facing of the pediment over the proscenium header and decorative rectangular panels have been placed on the facing of the proscenium's side walls. Four characters are seen on stage, two of whom are female—one appears to be pregnant! There is also a leaning lamppost and an unidentifiable piece of scenery in the background.

There may well have been a shallow orchestra pit, as Chalker states, but the sketch shows there was a thatched lean-to structure at audience right that housed the orchestra—at least for plays. It is just possible to make out an orchestra conductor with violin players in the background. For cabarets and variety shows, the orchestra would have been on stage (see Chalker's sketch of this theatre and its extensive backstage facilities in Chapter 12: "Jolly Good Show!").

Roland ons kind

At long last, on 29 June, Wim Kan's three-act comedy, *Roland ons kind* (*Roland Our Child*) opened. Kan played the leading male role of Stephan Partos.

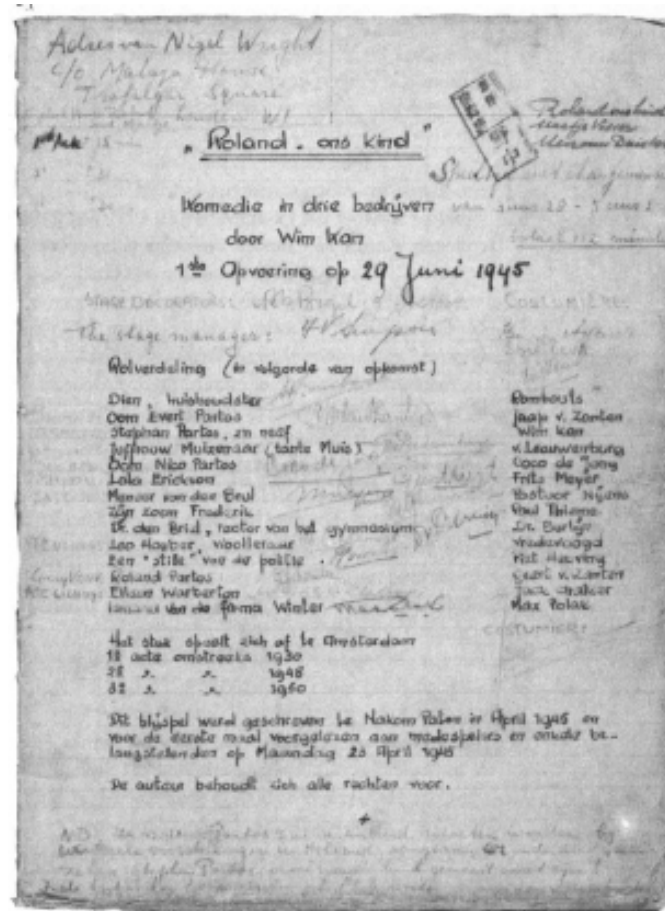


FIGURE 8.10. CAST LIST FOR *ROLAND ON'S KIND* FROM WIM KAN'S *BURMADAGBOEK*. COURTESY OF FRANS RUHL.

The playbill above gives the complete cast list for the show, but it was obviously made up before Kan recast his female lead as it still shows Frits Meyer playing Lola Erickson instead of Lugt. Chalker is listed as playing Eileen Warburton, who was a young English violinist. Faint notes written in pencil on the program tell us that Rob Brazil was one of two men responsible for set decoration (which probably meant the settings as well), and a British POW named Simpson was the stage manager.

Played entirely in Dutch—except for Chalker’s brief scene—Kan’s play was an enormous success even with those who couldn’t understand a word of it, thus proving MacFarlane and Kan’s other critics wrong. “Even the English had to admit 1-0 for the Dutch,” Kan wrote jubilantly. “The best that was offered in the camp, etc.”⁸⁰

But Kan was not happy with his performance as Stephan; he thought the role didn’t suit him. So he asked Jack Chalker to take over his role in the English-language version—it would be Chalker’s first male role—and created a new walk-on role for himself as the “Man from Drages”: an estate agent trying to collect an overdue lease payment.⁸¹ He also sought help from the British players in producing the English version: “Tonight review translation with Jaap, Padri, Davidson and Nigel Wright. English language version of *Roland* has to open in 14 days.”⁸²



FIGURE 8.11. SKETCH OF WIM KAN, JACK CHALKER. COURTESY OF JACK CHALKER.

At some point in their working relationship, Chalker drew this portrait sketch of Wim Kan. He had very fond memories of Kan and Wright as directors:

I can remember he and Nigel going over some of his drafts for plays with his Dutch friends and some of us connected with the theatre with a great deal of amusement—for he had great dry wit which was infectious. Both were sensitive and encouraging ‘teachers’ on the stage and I remember the quiet support they gave to us amateur actors both in rehearsal and during production.⁸³

When the next two weeks were suddenly given over to an original musical comedy, *Yes! Mr. Barry*, written and produced by Ted Ingram, Kan was given an unexpected reprieve in his deadline for the English-language production. *Roland* would now not have to open until 27 July. Ingram claimed he had written his whole show by moonlight when he was supposed to be asleep.⁸⁴ In this production, Jack Chalker played the female lead, Irene Kay, opposite Ingram as Mr. Barry.⁸⁵



FIGURE 8.12. SOUVENIR PROGRAM COVER FOR *YES! MR. BARRY*.
COURTESY OF FRED RANSOME SMITH. IWM MISC 90 ITEM 1323.

This large, brightly colored program for *Yes! Mr. Barry* was produced as a souvenir of the show by Fred “Smudger” Smith. It shows a beautiful starry-eyed young woman with long blonde curls wearing a bonnet and a cross on a chain around her neck—a late nineteenth century image of innocence. Or, after examining the contents of the playbill more closely, perhaps not!



FIGURE 8.13. PLAYBILL FOR *YES! MR. BARRY* BY FLIP RELF. IWM Misc 90 ITEM 1323.

Dutch artist Flip Relf drew a series of cartoons illustrating scenes from the musical as the playbill for this program. Given the content, you might suspect these were scenes from another production, except that the blond woman in the bonnet is at top center looking over these characters from another century.

The leaning lamppost in the lower left cartoon is an exact match for the one seen onstage in **Figure 8.9**, so it is very likely that what we see in that sketch is a scene from this production. Given the subject matter, a pregnant female character would be appropriate.

[To examine the playbill more closely and listen to an analysis of it, click on **Video Link 8.1**.]

Video



8.1

Two days after the opening, MacFarlane received a personal note from Chief Medical Officer Coates expressing his admiration for the show:

Please accept my congratulations on the excellent performance of your Theatrical Company yesterday, and convey to the Members of the Cast my sincere appreciation of their efforts.

In my opinion, it was the best show that has been staged in this Camp.⁸⁶

This note of appreciation from Coates, with its extravagant praise and emphasis on “your Theatrical Company,” may have had a political purpose as well. It may have been Coates’ way of helping restore MacFarlane’s injured ego and reputation after the ugliness of *The Two Mrs. Carrolls* incident.



FIGURE 8.14. VARIETY SHOW POSTER.
COURTESY OF RICHARD BROWN.

On 20 July, a variety show starring Eddie Monkhouse appeared. Band Sergeant Bernard Brown, who played a cornet in “The Untirables,” preserved this poster of the show embellished with cartoons by “Akki” (Basil Akhurst). In the contrary way of British humor, the extremely slim Brown had been given the nickname, “Nosher”, by his comrades.^{xxi87} So “The Boys of St. Noshers!” act on the bill was probably performed by men from Brown’s own hut, as they would later present him with a specially commissioned cartoon by “Akki” in “appreciation for [his] ‘fatherly’ care” (see Chapter 11: “Out of the Blue Came Freedom”).^{xxii}

Camp Update: Plans for a Breakout

With the defeat of the I. J. A. Forces in Burma and the growing fear among the Japanese that the Allies would soon launch a major incursion into Thailand, Dunlop became aware of a serious escalation of tension in the camp. A Korean guard (identified in Dunlop’s diary only as “Z”) surreptitiously made contact with Dunlop and suggested there would be death marches and massacres if such an invasion of Thailand by the Allies occurred. Looking at the high embankment surrounding the camp with the machine gun emplacements facing in, Dunlop had to agree.⁸⁸ On 25 July, he initiated plans for a breakout as a defense against such dire possibilities as the only way to get a few POWs out to tell the real story of what had happened on the Thailand-Burma railway. Dunlop did not plan to be one of them—he would stay with his patients and with Colonel Coates.⁸⁹

^{xxi} According to his son, Richard, “he was always thin—even before captivity.”

^{xxii} Akhurst, like Norman Pritchard in Nong Pladuk, had trained as a draftsman before the war. In Changi and Nong Pladuk, at least, “Akki” had been one of the performers. Whether he produced cartoon images for other posters/programs in Nakhon Pathom prior to this point is not known, as very few of these artifacts have survived. With the shortage of paper, this poster was printed on the backside of the camp’s Nominal Roll.

Roland Our Child

Instead of opening on 27 July as expected, Kan's English-language version of *Roland* was delayed one more time—due to the rain, perhaps—and opened the next night instead. Playing opposite Jack Chalker in his leading role as Stephan Partos was Ken Adams as his wife, Lola Erickson. Others in the cast were Kenneth Cornish, who played their son, Roland, Nigel Wright as Uncle Ivan, and van Leeuwenberg, who had been retained from the Dutch-language production to relieve his role of Aunt Mole. And in what may have been a conciliatory gesture, but was also a cheeky bit of casting, Colonel MacFarlane was cast in a walk-on role as Bellows' injured son, Frederick. For this version, the nationality of Chalker's old role of Eileen Warburton had been changed. It was now Suzanne LaCoste, a young French woman violinist, played by D. Cameron (see full cast list in **Figure 8.15**).

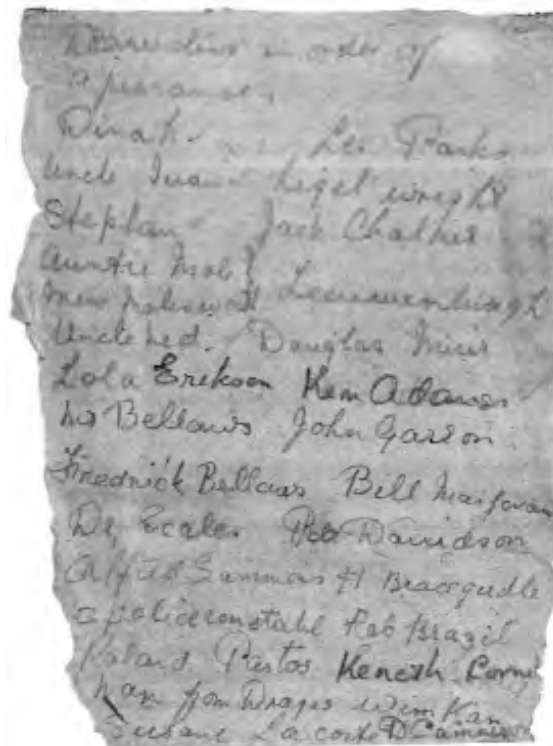


FIGURE 8.15. REMAINS OF CAST LIST FOR ENGLISH-LANGUAGE PRODUCTION OF *ROLAND OUR CHILD*. COURTESY OF JACK CHALKER.

Nigel Wright was the producer-director for the English-language production.

The main plot outline and excerpts from *Roland Our Child* that follow are taken from Jack Chalker's copy of the English translation handwritten on thirty-six pages of a small notebook. Minor revisions made to the text during rehearsals are evident. It is not a complete script; it contains only Chalker's "sides"—the scenes in which he had dialogue and/or his "line cues" (several lines of dialogue given by other characters prior to his entrances). But since Chalker played the lead role of Stephan, we do have most of the text. For this English-language version, all the references to Dutch locales were changed to English ones. Instead of Amsterdam, for instance, the action takes place in London. As in the original, its three acts span three decades: Act I (1930), Act II (1948), Act III (1950).

Act I

Act I opens in the living room of Ivan Partos' home in London. Stephan Partos, a former child prodigy violinist, was raised by his two uncles (Ivan and Ned) and one aunt (Mole) after his parents died. All of them live off Stephan's earnings as a professional solo violinist. Now "nearly 27," Stephan no longer exhibits the talent he once had and his previous evening's recital has received terrible reviews in the morning's newspapers. In order to secure a financial future for the family, Uncle Ivan hatches a scheme for Stephan to marry another former child prodigy violinist, Lola Erickson, who is experiencing a similar loss of her virtuosic powers. By mixing their genes together, he believes, they would produce a child with the most amazing talent.

But when he broaches the idea to Stephan, Stephan is shocked by the crass suggestion. And when he learns that Uncle Ivan has sent a telegram to Lola asking her to come to the house that very day under the mistaken notion that he will arrange a concert booking for her, Stephan explodes, arguing with Uncle Ned and Aunt Mole as well as Uncle Ivan. Their argument is interrupted by Uncle Ivan, who, looking out the window, tells them that Lola's taxi has just drawn up outside. Stephan is encouraged to take a quick look at her out the window, and his immediate reaction is, "Damn it!! She's taller than I am – oh no! Not for me – I don't want to meet her." And he storms out, headed to his room.^{xxiii}

The brief scene of Lola's entrance and introduction to the family is not included in Chalker's script, as his character was not on stage, but it is fairly easy to figure out what transpires in it from the context. At some point, Uncle Ned and Aunt Mole leave to go get Stephan, and while Uncle Ivan is alone with Lola, he tells her that Stephan has an idea of how they both might secure their futures—by getting married and producing an infant who would inherit their combined talents and thus be a greater violinist than either one of them. Lola, like Stephan, is also offended by the idea and starts to leave. But at that very moment, Uncle Ned and Aunt Mole usher Stephan into the room. Lola makes excuses as to why she must leave immediately, but Stephan asks her to stay a moment longer as he has something to say to her. The others depart.

When Stephan and Lola are alone, Stephan convinces her that the idea of their arranged marriage was not his. Both agree categorically that they don't want to get married—and certainly not to a fellow musician! But as they continue talking, they begin to warm to each other's presence and soon find themselves sitting down beside each other on the couch. Comparing their careers as infant prodigies, Lola mentions the album of her past reviews she brought to the meeting at Uncle Ivan's request. Stephan indicates interest in taking a look at it and discovers it also contains photographs of Lola's childhood and family.

Stephan: *Who is that old gentleman?*

Lola: *That's grandpa, my mother's father. He was a positive tower of strength and muscle. When he was 82 years old he trained himself to climb Box Hill near Heathrow on his tricycle!*

Stephan: *Good Lord! Is he dead now?*

Lola: *Yes, alas! He was such a nice man, but a bit mad. One day we found him dead on his tricycle.*

Stephan [Laughs, then]: *– Oh, sorry.*

^{xxiii} In the original Dutch version the reference to Lola's height was an in-joke that must have delighted Kan's audience, as Kan was short in stature. That it is retained in the English-language version suggests that there may have also been a significant height difference between Chalker and Adams as well.

Lola: *Not at all! We used to laugh a lot about Grandpa. He was the laughing stock of the family.*

Stephan: *And you were the musical one of the family.*

As they continue to compare notes about their trials and tribulations as child prodigies, the notion that a marriage between them might produce a true prodigy on the violin surfaces once again.

Lola: *So you do agree with your Uncle's scheme after all?*

Stephan [frightened]: *Good heavens, no! How can you think that? I think it's a most immoral idea! But nevertheless if we could love each other and if we were to get married – have a son – then he might become a famous infant prodigy – That's so, isn't it?*

Lola: *I don't know . . . it's all so sudden. It sort of takes my breath away. It's a beautiful idea to live your own life all over again in the person of your child.*

Stephan: *And avoid all the mistakes which you and your parents made before.*

Lola: *Oh, I'm sure I could give my whole life to it. If it were a son I should call him . . .*

Stephan: *Roland?*

Lola: *Roland? Why Roland?*

Stephan: *I don't know, but there's something about it . . . To me it sounds a note of promise.*

Sparking off each other's ideas, they spin fantasies about the future.

Lola: *It's amazing, but all of a sudden I feel I can see him – now. He is rushing into the room, and flinging his arms round my neck and whispering in my ear, "Mummy, play something on your violin for me, will you?"*

Stephan: *He is still very young, though. A small boy of 5 or 6 at the most – but when he is 9 I can see him sitting between us in the Queen's Hall – the last tones of the music have died away & I say to him, "Come on Roland, we must go home" – and when I look at him, he has big tears in his eyes . . .*

Lola: *And later still when he is playing at his first recital – we are together – one of the vast applauding audience – and Roland stands alone – stern – but quite steady on the platform – He makes his bow to the audience – applause . . . look, look, he waves to us! He is smiling at us!*

Stephan: *And we take each other's hand [takes Lola's hand], and whisper softly – Roland, our child!*

Lola [looks inquiringly at Stephan]: – *Could that be true? Roland . . . our child?*

Curtain

Act II

Act II opens eighteen years later in 1948. The setting has now become the living room in Stephan and Lola's home. Their marriage has produced a child, Roland, who is now sixteen. As planned, Roland has been taking violin lessons and Lola and Stephan have the highest hopes for his—and their—future. What follows is a series of short scenes that totally undermine that illusion. First, a Mr. Bellows and his son, Frederick, arrive. Bellows tells them that Roland has recently beat up his son, giving him a broken arm and head lacerations. This is followed by another arrival, Mr. Simmons, Roland's violin teacher, who informs them that Roland hasn't appeared for his lessons for two months. And finally, a police constable appears who notifies them that Roland has been cited for performing acrobatic stunts on a bicycle along the busy Edgeware Road. Lola and Stephan categorically deny that this miscreant could be their son.

But the constable has brought Roland along with him. When confronted with these accusations, Roland admits that he fought Bellows' son because he was stealing his girl; that instead of attending his violin lessons he used the money to buy a racing bike; and that he did indeed race along Edgeware Road. To top it off, Roland takes this opportunity to inform his parents that he has never had any interest in being a violinist—that was their plan for his life, not his. Instead, he plans on becoming a physical education instructor.

In the stunned silence that follows, everyone except Stephan, Lola, and Roland quickly vacate the room. After some stern words from Stephan that a career as physical education teacher is never going to happen, Roland is sent to his room. Devastated by these revelations, and seeing all their dreams for the future possibly vanish, Stephan and Lola search their memories for how Roland could have possibly come by his "craze for sports." Then Stephan realizes the connection.

Stephan: *But I remember only too well. On that very morning in this very room, and on this very sofa, when you showed me your photograph-album! Who was that man who still climbed Box Hill on a tricycle when he was 82? Who was that?*

Lola [shocked]: *Good Lord! Grandpa!*

Stephan: *Of course, Grandpa! Who was found dead on his tricycle. It's from him he gets this ridiculous sports-complex. It's going to ruin his whole career.*

Act III

Act III opens two years later in the same setting as Act II, but now all the living room furniture has been removed and it has been outfitted as a small gymnasium. This is Uncle Ivan's scheme to insure that Roland will earn his physical education degree within a year. Unbeknownst to Stephan, Uncle Ivan has leased the gym equipment from Drages' Estate Agency and given Stephan's name as the guarantor. Roland announces that he plans to go off for the weekend with a friend. Uncle Ivan confides to Stephan and Lola

that he believes Roland is secretly going off to meet Suzanne LaCoste, a young French violinist who has been making quite a splash in London recently. Confronted with this charge, Roland denies he is running off to see Suzanne, but does confess that what he and a friend are actually going to do is compete in the five-day National Bicycle Races in Wembley Stadium. Hearing this news, Stephan throws a fit: “But I can tell you - this is not going to happen save over my dead body!”

Roland counters that he has already signed a contract to compete in the race. Stephan replies, “The contract has no value whatever because you haven’t come of age yet! I tell you it shall not happen!” It is just at this point that the man from Drages (Wim Kan) enters and tells Stephan that he must have the first payment on the lease of the gym equipment immediately or he will be forced to confiscate their home furnishings as payment. Not having the amount needed, Stephan and Lola are faced with the loss of all their possessions. In the hubbub that follows, Roland reveals that the contract he signed is for the exact amount needed to cover the lease payment. Desperate for the money, Stephan is forced to agree to Roland’s participation in the race. With that guarantee, the estate agent leaves.

Uncle Ned enters and tells them that “a pretty girl is pacing up and down” in the hall. This is Suzanne LaCoste, whom Roland now announces he has invited to the house to meet his parents as he is determined to marry her. Following another shocked silence, Suzanne enters and is introduced, and an awkward scene ensues. Then, devising another of his clever schemes to resolve the impasse, Uncle Ivan calls the concert hall box office and secures seats for Stephan and Lola to attend Suzanne’s violin recital that night. Everyone departs, leaving Stephan and Lola alone.

Stephan [after silence]: *And here we are, without a son, without a home, without a penny and the infant prodigy’s rendering of Mendelssohn’s violin concerto in E minor has turned into a gramophone record that’s going to race round and round at an idiotic speed, never stopping, – for 5 days.*

Lola: *Birds fly from their nests and never ask the way. We have made the mistake of 1000’s of other parents. We did not ask: “Child what do you want to become; how would you like to manage your own life?” No! We simply dictated – “our only son, your future career is this: – to increase the glory of the family.” But we forgot that little children grow up, and one day they must shatter our castles in the air. We should still be grateful that it has all ended like this.*

Stephan: *But it’s so very difficult to change over to a new ideal and still be enthusiastic.*

Lola: *Yet we shall have to, Stephan. It’s his happiness that counts, not ours!*

Stephan: *But will Roland ever be happy living like this?*

Lola: *That’s exactly what I’ve been thinking, Stephan. But why shouldn’t he? His career will be one of physical development, of speed, muscle, and human strength; ours was of the intellect and the spirit. But what Roland may miss when he gets older, his wife can give him with her natural gifts for music. There’s still time for him.*

Stephan: *You mean, that Roland will always be for us an infant prodigy?*

Lola: *Yes! Of course not as we have pictured him, but an infant prodigy according to his own rights.*

Stephan [thoughtfully]: *Roland, who becomes a teacher in 2 years time!*

Lola: *Roland, with his diploma for physical training –*

Stephan: *Roland – the star of the cycle race.*

Lola [looking at Stephan, asking]: *Roland – our child?*

Stephan [taking her hand]: *Roland, still our child!*⁹⁰

Curtain

Like its Dutch language predecessor, this production of *Roland Our Child* was an enormous success as well, finding resonance with its English-speaking audiences as it had with its Dutch. “Some Brits,” wrote Kan, “said I could earn a lot of money with the piece. ‘Such plays you see in the best theatres in London.’”⁹¹

Roland’s Relevance

What could possibly have been the significance of this comedy of ideas for Kan’s POW audience? The play opens in 1930—the past—a time in which the older men in his audience were also young men, like Stephan in Act I. The next two acts take place in the future (1948) and (1950). By this time the POWs will surely have been liberated and repatriated back to their homelands contemplating their own futures and families.^{xxiv} What did Kan want to say to his audience about their future?

Since Stephan is the main character, it is his conflict and its resolution that the audience becomes most aware of. So one possible reading of *Roland Our Child* is that it is a cautionary tale in which Kan warns the older members of his audience that when they return, they need to break free of the old societal values and expectations that bind them to the past in an attempt to control the future—just as Stephan is forced to do. And when “Grandpa’s genes” resurface in their children, as they certainly will in all their “positive strength and muscle,” the POWs must remember to ask their offspring Lola’s question: “Child, what do you want to become; how would you like to manage your own life?”

For those younger POWs in the audience, who may have identified more with Roland, the message is the same, only more urgent. If the years of captivity have taught them anything, it should be that when they return to “civvy street,” they must claim their right to determine their own futures.

The Critical Moment

Meanwhile, events offstage were quickly moving from bad to worse. The only entries in Dunlop’s diary during the first week of August 1945 concern the deteriorating camp situation and the puzzling arrival and departure of Red Cross stores. In the midst of the growing crisis—and seemingly unaware that the drama being played out on the world stage was moving quickly toward its climax—Kan noted in his diary on 6 August that he has started rehearsals for a production of his “almost a farce,” *Maatje*.⁹²

On 13 August, Dunlop learns—again through “Z”—that the Russians have entered the war and the

^{xxiv} *The Second World War is never mentioned in the play, but its purposeful absence makes it all the more present as a context in which to understand Kan’s meaning.*

Allies have given an ultimatum to Japan.⁹³ The POWs fate now hung in the balance.

The next day Kan records that Jack Chalker had drawn a nice poster for *Maatje*, which hung in the canteen as an advertisement for its upcoming opening on the seventeenth.⁹⁴ Dunlop's diary entry for the same date described the secret plans he had made—not for a breakout as contemplated earlier—but for a quick takeover of the camp if the possibility of a Japanese surrender became a reality.⁹⁵

On 15 August, Dunlop made a quick note that all was in readiness for the takeover—but added that there were credible rumors the war might be over.⁹⁶

The following day was 16 August—and the war *was* over.

Endnotes

- 1 Flower, 246.
- 2 Dunlop, 412.
- 3 Chalker, BRA, 104.
- 4 Dunlop, 411.
- 5 Kan, Diary, 24 June 1944.
- 6 Chalker, "War Diary" extracts, Sheet 2.
- 7 Chalker, Letter, 7 October 2005.
- 8 Donald Smith, 152.
- 9 Chalker, Letter, 7 October 2005.
- 10 Norman Smith, 49–50.
- 11 Gibson, Memoir, 9.
- 12 Gibson, Memoir, 9.
- 13 Gibson, Memoir, 9.
- 14 Kan, Diary, 26 October 1944.
- 15 Chalker, Letter, 7 October 2005.
- 16 Brazil, Letter, 29 October 2000.
- 17 Chalker, Letter, 7 October 2005.
- 18 Gibson, Letter, 22 May 2004; Norman Smith, 51.
- 19 Gibson, Memoir, 8.
- 20 Norman Smith, 58.
- 21 Dunn, 139.
- 22 Gibson, Memoir, 11.
- 23 Gibson, Memoir, 11.
- 24 Dunlop, 421.
- 25 Kan, Diary, 6 December 1944.
- 26 Margie Bellamy, "Comment on text," E-mail, 17 July 2008.
- 27 Kan, Diary, 6 December 1944.
- 28 Dunlop, 423.
- 29 Dunlop, 423.
- 30 Translation of notice by Margie Samethini Bellamy.
- 31 Kan, Diary, 6 December 1944.
- 32 Norman Smith, 60.
- 33 Barnard, 154.
- 34 Ingram, 2.
- 35 Dunlop, 427.
- 36 Composite sources: Norman Smith, 53; Chalker, Letter, 3 April 2000.

- 37 Norman Smith, 52—53.
- 38 Norman Smith, 52—53.
- 39 Evers, 68.
- 40 Chalker, BRA, 116—117.
- 41 Chalker, BRA, 116.
- 42 Chalker, “War Diary” extracts, Sheet 3.
- 43 Chalker, Letter 2 March 2000.
- 44 Dunn, 136.
- 45 Chalker, “War Diary” extracts, Sheet 3.
- 46 Chalker, “War Diary” extracts, Sheet 3.
- 47 Ingram, 1.
- 48 Brazil, Letter, 16 October 2000.
- 49 Brazil, Letter, 29 October 2000.
- 50 Chalker, Letter, 7 October 2005.
- 51 Chalker, “War Diary” extracts, Sheet 3.
- 52 Chalker, Letter, 2 March 2000.
- 53 Chalker, Letter, 24 July 2000.
- 54 Chalker, Letter, 24 July 2000.
- 55 Fred Ransome Smith, Letter, n.d. [2011].
- 56 Dunlop, 425.
- 57 Chalker, Letter, 7 October 2005.
- 58 Gibson, Memoir, 12.
- 59 Gibson, Letter, 22 May 2004.
- 60 Gibson, Memoir, 12.
- 61 Chalker, “War Diary” extracts, Sheet 3.
- 62 Chalker, “War Diary” extracts, Sheet 3; Letter, 3 April and 24 July 2000.
- 63 Kan, Diary, 3 May and 6 May 1945.
- 64 Chalker, “War Diary” extracts, Sheet 3.
- 65 Kan, Diary, 6 May 1945.
- 66 Kan, Diary, 20 May 1945.
- 67 Chalker, BRA, 114.
- 68 Chalker, BRA, 114.
- 69 Chalker, BRA, 114.
- 70 Chalker, Diary, 18 May 1945.
- 71 Kan, Diary, 27 May 1945.
- 72 Kan, Diary, 27 May and 3 June 1945.
- 73 Kan, Diary, 3 June 1945.
- 74 Kan, Diary, 10 June 1945.
- 75 Kan Diary, 17 June 1945.
- 76 Kan, Diary, 17 June 1945.
- 77 Kan Diary, 25 June 1945.
- 78 Chalker, Letter, 2 March 2000.
- 79 Ingram, 2.
- 80 Kan, Diary, 30 June 1945.
- 81 Kan Diary, 25 July 1945.
- 82 Kan, Diary, 30 June 1945.
- 83 Chalker, Letter, 23 June 2003.
- 84 Ingram, 2.
- 85 Chalker, “War Diary” extracts, Sheet 4.
- 86 IWM Misc. 90 Item 1323.
- 87 Richard Brown, E-mail to author, 6 August 2011.

- 88 Dunlop, 432.
- 89 Dunlop, 433.
- 90 Kan, *Roland* English trans., 1–36.
- 91 Kan, Diary, 1 August 1945.
- 92 Kan, Diary, 6 August 1945.
- 93 Dunlop, 433–434.
- 94 Kan, Diary, 14 August 1945.
- 95 Dunlop, 434.
- 96 Dunlop, 434.

Chapter 9: “The Battle for Concerts”

Kanburi Officers’ Camp

Kanburi Officers’ Camp was established by the I. J. A. Southern Command in late January 1945 as a place to house captive Allied POW officers. As the war turned against the Japanese, there was growing concern that these officers might lead their men in a breakout.¹ To forestall such a possibility, all the POW officers—even those from as far away as Saigon in French Indochina [Vietnam]—were ordered sent to Kanburi/051 Kilo, a camp just north of Kanchanaburi in western Thailand. Under the repressive and vindictive policies of the I. J. A. commandant at Kanburi, the POWs’ integrity and fortitude would be tested to the utmost—in no area more so than their struggle to provide some sort of life-sustaining entertainment for themselves. Lieutenant Louis Baume, one of the junior officers imprisoned in Kanburi, would call this struggle the “battle for concerts.”²

Whether published or unpublished, the records kept by POWs at Kanburi all suffer from similar deficiencies. They are written either in vague chronological order with few details and significant time gaps or as summary paragraphs in official report style, each focused on a particular topic or time period. Rarely is a specific date given for any event. This sketchy recordkeeping stemmed from a ban on the possession of writing paper and instruments in Kanburi, so strictly enforced through frequent unannounced searches that trying to maintain a secret daily diary became just too risky. Afterward, when these men sat down to transcribe their jottings or write their memoirs, they had difficulty remembering many of the details of what had taken place when at Kanburi, except for those few occasions when an event was so memorable—for good or ill—that images of it remained vivid.

Inexplicably, the memoirs of Lieutenants John Coast and Norman Carter, two of our most important sources of information on the entertainment that took place on the Thailand-Burma railway, are practically silent on the subject of entertainment in Kanburi Officers’ Camp. Explanations for this omission exist, as we shall see. One of the few observations Coast did make was that “nearly everyone used to look forward to the Monday nights of concert, variety or revue,” though in his opinion, under the circumstances, “the shows couldn’t be first-class.”³

But Lieutenant G. E. Chippington disagreed. He thought the shows in Kanburi Officers’ Camp were “of superb quality. Once again there proves to be considerable pool of talent in the camp.”⁴ While Coast and Carter seem to have lost interest in detailing the entertainments in Kanburi, Captain C. D. L. Aylwin and Other Ranks John Durnford, along with Louis Baume, provide us with the best records we have of the camp’s entertainment.

The ban on paper and writing instruments also had a negative impact on the POWs’ ability to produce performance-related artifacts, such as souvenir programs, publicity posters, and costume renderings. In contrast to other POW camps in Thailand, where many of these artifacts were produced and have survived, there are practically none for Kanburi Officers’ Camp. Since posters and souvenir programs have been a primary source of detailed information on camp entertainment, their absence here means that we know little about what concert parties were produced and even less about who the producer-directors, designers, and performers were. But that does not mean we know nothing: the series of skirmishes that took place in the “battle for concerts” are well documented.

This narrative of the entertainment that took place in Kanburi Officers’ Camp is, therefore, more than for any other camp, a conjectural reconstruction.

Backstory: October 1942-January 1945

Kanburi POW Camps/050-053 Kilo

A cluster of Japanese administrative and POW camps all stood within a mile or so of each other outside the provincial city of Kanchanaburiⁱ: Kanburi Hospital Camp/050 Kilo; No. 2 Base Camp/051 Kilo, which contained two aerodromes and a railway engineering workshop; and Kanburi Base Camp/053 Kilo, headquarters for the 9th Railway Regiment, responsible for construction on the Thailand side of the railway. In late August 1943, what came to be known as “the Radio Incident” occurred in Kanburi/051 Kilo when a secret radio was found by the Japanese during a surprise search and five men were beaten severely, two to their deaths. The three survivors of that initial beating were then interrogated and tortured by the Kempeitai to obtain further information about the operation of their radio.ⁱⁱ News of this incident spread quickly up and down the railway grapevine, producing a chilling effect on those POW camps that still possessed secret radios.

With major construction on the railway completed in October 1943, Kanburi/053 Kilo joined Kanburi/050 Kilo as a hospital camp for the “F” and “H” Forces evacuated from up country. Russell Braddon recalled a night sometime in late 1943 during which an impromptu sing-along by British POWs in a neighboring hospital ward took place, joined in succession by patients in the next two wards. And with that, Braddon concluded, “the worst of Thailand was over.”ⁱⁱⁱ Comic lectures given by “Professor” Alan Roberts and “Hot Piano” performances by Bill Williams took place in the days that followed.ⁱⁱⁱ⁶

On 5 December 1943 a simple evening of entertainment was recorded by Medical Officer Roy Mills: “There was a wonderful camp concert of one hour’s duration tonight. Artists simply sat on boxes or stood. Piano [accordion]—candlelight only but the excellent performance made light of such deficiencies as a stage.”⁷ Given the date, this was most likely a Dutch cabaret for St. Nicholas’ Day. One might suspect that some sort of Christmas and New Year’s celebrations took place as well, although no records of such have been located.

Once the New Year was past, the remnants of “F” and “H” Forces were evacuated to Singapore,^{iv} and POWs who had worked on the Burma side of the railway took their places. In February, Van Dorst and his “Rimboe Club” troupe performed their first cabaret in Kanburi/050 Kilo. As the hospital filled up with more Burma POWs, Van Dorst and his cabaret troupe were transferred to Tamarkan. Shortly after his arrival in March suffering from recurring bouts of malaria, the Dutch entertainer Wim Kan experienced a relapse and broke out with sores all over his body. After a brief period of steady recovery, he had another relapse on 9 April and was readmitted to the hospital. This time he came close to death, even to the point of having the priest at his bedside. On 2 May, he was moved down the line to the hospital camp for chronic cases at Nakhon Pathom.

In mid-May an announcement was circulated throughout the hospital and relocation camps that the I. J. A. wanted to establish a “consolidated” concert party to tour the railway maintenance camps. It would be based in Kanburi/051 Kilo and performers would be given substantial resources and perks.^v Among the POWs from other camps answering the call were several Chungkai performers, including “Tug” Wilson and “Frankie” Quinton. Later that month, Quinton teamed up with a Dutch accordionist, “Matzie”

ⁱ “Kanburi” was the shortened name most often used for these camps even by the Japanese.

ⁱⁱ See Eric Lomax’s extraordinary memoir of his experience, *The Railway Man*, for a powerful description of this event and its unexpected consequences.

ⁱⁱⁱ Both of them had performed in Changi prior to being sent Up Country.

^{iv} There, in Sime Road Camp, and later, in Changi Gaol, Bill Williams and Alan Roberts would become major concert party producers and performers.

^v The most logical choice for the location of this concert party should have been the large hospital camp at Kanburi/050 Kilo, but all the evidence points to Kanburi/051 Kilo as its location.

[Will Matser], and appeared in an N.E.I. cabaret, *Boerenbruiloft* (Peasant Wedding) as one of Kanburi/051 Kilo's first concert party offerings.^{vi}

On 13 June, Gus Harffey and a few additional Chungkai performers arrived in Kanburi to take up the offer as well. What they found was that the Japanese appeal had paid off handsomely. A large concert party ("Kanburi Productions") had been formed by David Gregg and John Lovell,^{vii} and they were about to open their first major production.

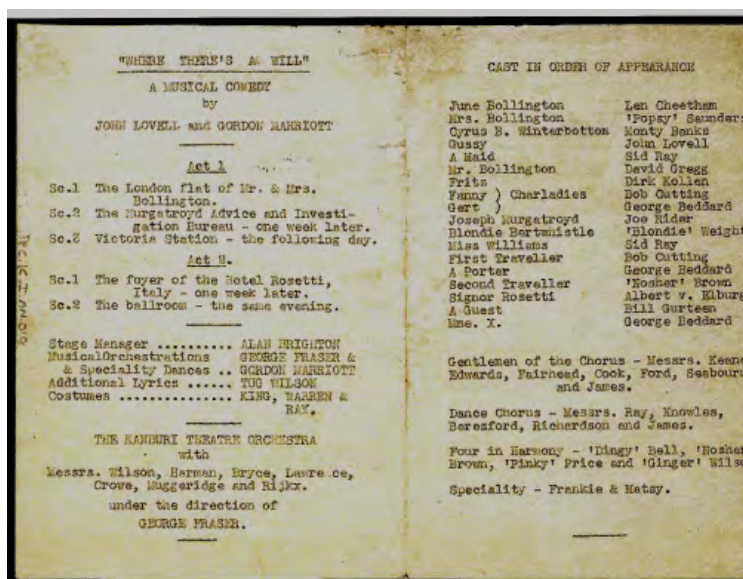


FIGURE 9.1. PLAYBILL FOR *Where There's A Will*. COURTESY OF NIOD.

Where There's A Will, an original musical comedy by Lovell, and Gordon Marriott, opened on 17 June. It was a large-cast full-scale production with settings, costumes, and dance numbers supported by a seven-piece orchestra led by George Fraser.

In late June six musicians from Tamarkan, including the American Wilbur G. Smith, arrived to join the concert party. But for some reason the grand scheme for a touring concert party never materialized and it was Chungkai that supplied the maintenance camps with entertainment.

With the influx of new personnel, the original concert party was reorganized and a lean-to theatre—"The Playhouse"—was built so they could perform during the monsoon season. In the future, all shows in Kanburi would be produced by "Playhouse Presents."

The inaugural production in the Playhouse on 8 July was *A Night of Comedy, Music & Drama*—three one-act plays produced by Lovell and Gregg—that included: "The Boy Comes Home," "Hen-pecked," and "The Mask." Among the performers was camp quartermaster Captain "Jock" Fraser. Len Cheetham, Syd Ray, and "Blondie" Weightman played the major female roles. From the program credits it is clear that Harffey had taken over leadership of the "Kanburi Theatre Orchestra" from Fraser as it was now "Gus Harffey and His Orchestra" that performed the Entr'acte music.⁸

^{vi} As there is no date on the extant program, this placement is conjectural.

^{vii} They may have been former members of "Fizzer" Pearson's "Players" at Chungkai.



FIGURE 9.2. PHOTOGRAPH OF KANBURI ORCHESTRA. COURTESY OF WILBUR SMITH. FROM VIEWER'S LEFT TO RIGHT BEHIND THE OSTENSIBLE CONDUCTOR, JOCK FRASER, THE MUSICIANS ARE FRANKIE QUINTON (BRITISH, ACCORDION), HARMAN (BRITISH, ACCORDION), WILBUR G. SMITH (AMERICAN, IN BACK WITH ONLY HIS HEAD VISIBLE), "NODDER" SMITH (A.I.F., HORN), JIMMY BRYCE (BRITISH, DRUMS), "TUG" WILSON (BRITISH, VIOLIN), RON MUGGERIDGE (BRITISH, CLARINET), HANS RYKE (DUTCH, GUITAR), REG LAWRENCE (BRITISH, GUITAR), AND NOEL "JIMMY" CROWE (A.I.F., GUITAR).

This photograph of the orchestra was taken by a Korean guard as the group was rehearsing. In the foreground, apparently leading the orchestra is Jock Fraser, who actually had just happened by as the photograph was being taken and was asked to stand in front of the group as their conductor.⁹ Although he is in the photograph, Wilbur Smith was no longer in the orchestra. He had become involved in staging productions instead.

In the background is a glimpse of the Playhouse. A slanted roof and part of the façade of one of the shed-like side wings is just visible between the two figures at left. Judging by the height of the musicians in relationship to the size of the proscenium opening behind them, it looks like a fairly small performance space.

Following this 8 July production there is a gap in the entertainment record at Kanburi, due, perhaps, to the heavy monsoon rainfall. So it may have been September before *Live, Love, & Laugh* was performed.^{viii} This was another large-cast full-scale original musical comedy by Gregg, Lovell, and Marriott, with twenty-five musical numbers, dance "arrangements" by Jock Fraser, and, for the first time on the Kanburi stage, lighting, with credit given to Wilbur G. Smith for this new feature.

Music Hath Charms was a concert of semi-classical and popular music that was probably the concert party's offering for the command performance in "celebration" of the joining of the Burma and Thai ends of the railway. But the inclusion of "China Tango" would be conductor Gus Harffey's ironic commentary on the event, reminding listeners of the brutal treatment of the Chinese by the Japanese. Even

^{viii} Since there is no date on the souvenir program, this placement is conjectural.

Harffey's title for the concert, with its unvoiced completion, carried subversive significance.

Harffey's orchestra had now grown to fifteen players (see **Figure 9.3** in the Image Gallery for a playbill giving information on performers and selections.)



FIGURE 9.4. PROGRAM COVER FOR *A New Revue*. COURTESY OF NIOD.

The next Kanburi production was David Gregg's *A New Revue* that opened on 10 November (see **Figures 9.5 a-c** in the Image Gallery for the playbill of this production). The souvenir program cover above shows the Playhouse Presents' new stylized "double P" logo. A large version in wood was placed at the apex of the proscenium's header.

Nite and Day was "The Playhouse's" Christmas show. Little about this production is known except Wilbur Smith's pride about a unique lighting effect he had produced.^{ix10}

1945

After the first of the year, the lives of the POWs in Kanburi/051 Kilo suddenly changed when the other ranks POWs were hastily ordered elsewhere in preparation for the camp's conversion into an officers-only camp. Exemptions to this policy were other ranks who worked as servants for the Japanese or batmen for POW officers.¹¹ Given this ruling, the concert party was able to retain a few performers and musicians, including several "Les Girls." Wilbur G. Smith was sent to the new airfield construction site at Nakhon Nai. David Greg, on the other hand, was included in a draft for Japan. He would later appear in a series of camp shows at Keijo in Korea.

^{ix} More fully explained in the "Lighting" section of "Chapter 12: 'Jolly Good Show!'"

The Officers' Camp

Lieutenant-Colonel Philip Toosey and the officers from Nong Pladuk were among the first outsiders to arrive in the newly designated officers' camp on 25 January. Toosey's "Official Report" contains a succinct description of the camp they found on arrival: "one of the smallest in Thailand, dirty, badly broken down Huts and generally unpleasant. We were put in before the Camp had been extended or improved and for the first few weeks conditions were very unhappy."¹²

Their I. J. A. commandant was Captain Noguchi, whom Toosey thought "an arrogant sadist of the worst type."¹³ But Noguchi would not be a full-time presence in Kanburi until after 17 February, when he was relieved of command of Chungkai across the river. Toosey believed one of Noguchi's goals was to break the men's spirit by threatening and harassing them in any way he could, even to the point of rebellion, so that he would have justification for killing them all off.¹⁴ In response, Louis Baume revealed the POWs' strategy: to "dig our heels in right from the beginning and endeavour to resist the Nips every inch as far as it is possible—and there has already been plenty of trouble as a result."¹⁵ As the months passed, a battle of wit and will played out over who was really in control of the prisoners' mental and emotional well-being.

Slightly over three thousand POWs would eventually be imprisoned at Kanburi: two thousand British, Australian, and American officers, one thousand Netherlands East Indies [N.E.I.] officers, and one hundred and eighty other ranks from all nationalities, officially listed on the rolls as "cooks and batmen."¹⁶ Ninety-eight of the officers were Field Grade (lieutenant-colonels and majors). The British lieutenant-colonels and majors were housed together in a hut nicknamed the "Imperial War Museum."¹⁷ With this many members of "the old school tie" tradition in the same camp, what would matter wouldn't be only rank with its privileges but also nationality and class: one was either British or one wasn't; Regular Army or not.

The beginnings of the POW administration at Kanburi were chaotic as the lieutenant-colonels jockeyed for position. Lieutenant-Colonel McKellen, an Australian, was initially designated as POW Officer in Charge.^x But when those with more time in grade—and Regular Army—arrived, McKellen was replaced by British Lieutenant-Colonel G. E. Swinton, Malaya Command. As Swinton's health was not good, a committee of lieutenant-colonel liaison officers, two from each major constituency (British, Australian, N.E.I., plus the sole American) actually ran the camp.¹⁸ At Japanese insistence, Toosey, initially left out of this grouping, was later "put in" as the British liaison officer.¹⁹

But this cumbersome arrangement eventually proved unworkable, and in mid-April the Japanese installed Toosey as the sole liaison officer to run the POW camp, along with a British and Dutch adjutant.²⁰ This change did not happen without a lot of grumbling from the Imperial War Museum or the Australians, who felt slighted and, it now appeared, had been excluded from the administration altogether.²¹ As a junior officer in charge of others more senior than himself in time in grade, and as a member of the Territorial Army, Toosey found trying to command Regular Army officers, many of whom were more interested in their own welfare than the good of the camp, to be "one of the most difficult experiences of my life."²²

Work on rebuilding the camp started immediately. Since Kanburi was designated an officers-only camp, the officers, not the few other ranks in their midst, became the primary work force. From Major Jim Jacobs' point of view, "it was better for our bodily and mental health that we should have some occupation. With 3,000 of us confined in such a small area, mental and physical stagnation would have been the inevitable consequence of idleness."²³ Besides rebuilding huts for accommodation and cooking, the men leveled the ground for better drainage, dug extra latrines, and constructed facilities for a water pump, among other tasks.

^x Major Jim Jacobs (A.I.F.) states that the first Allied camp commander was actually Lieutenant-Colonel McEachern [see Jacobs, 135].

But when ordered to erect a ten-foot-high bamboo stockade around the perimeter of the camp and to dig a deep ditch inside it (with the displaced dirt used to create a high bund “to make sure that none of us escape from this cage”²⁴)—construction the POWs considered military defenses and against the Geneva Convention—they refused to do so. Briefly. Their initial refusal was met, in Toosey’s words, with “immediate and savage punishment.”²⁵ Later they were warned that if they approached within two yards of the stockade, they would be shot.²⁶ As at Nakhon Pathom, machine gun placements would be strategically located on the bund, facing inward.

From the failure of this protest and others like it, the Kanburi POWs learned that their future resistance tactics had to be subtle and clever, not confrontational—unless absolutely necessary. If there was little they could do to win any open physical conflict with their Japanese overseers, they could at least outwit their captors in ways that would empower them and preserve their self-esteem.

“A Propaganda Stunt”

On Monday, 30 January, all work on rebuilding the camp was stopped when the POWs were required to attend their first concert party—by Gus Harffey and his band—given not as a magnanimous act on Noguchi’s part but because photographs of this event would show the world how well the Japanese were caring for the officers. “A propaganda stunt,” Baume called it, and then described how the POWs tried to subvert the photographs’ value:

We had all been ordered to parade in front of the stage wearing shirts, hats, footwear and our best pair of shorts. Once there we were told to sit down on the ground in little groups and to smoke cigarettes and enjoy ourselves while the band entertained us from the stage. The Order of the Day was “Oru men happy”—so we tried to look as gloomy as possible while the orchestra^{xi} played appropriate music such as “Rule Britannia,” “There will always be an England,” and the Nip photographer took pictures of their happy English prisoners. When the Nips had finished and were walking away, the band played “Colonel Bogey.”²⁷

^{xi} To the majority of the POWs, the terms “band” and “orchestra” were synonymous.



FIGURE 9.6. POWs ATTENDING A CONCERT AT KANBURI. PHOTOGRAPHER JOHN MUNSLOW WILLIAMS. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL.

According to the Australian War Memorial records, this photograph of a small group of POWs attending a concert at Kanburi was taken secretly by John Munslow Williams. If so, it can function as a substitute for the propaganda photograph mentioned above. A few of the men are aware of the camera, but all look as if they had gotten the word to look as sullen and dejected as possible. They are sitting on the ground or on camp-made stools on a hard-packed mound of earth in front of the stage. Other POWs stand at the back. A bamboo balustrade marking the edge of the orchestra pit can be seen in the foreground lower left. In the background is a backboard for a basketball court and a row of peaked roofs—their living quarters.

Harffey and his band joined in this act of resistance by playing normally forbidden patriotic and martial music, and when they struck up “Colonel Bogey’s March,” the POWs must have genuinely roared with laughter. As many times as it was used Up Country to mock them, the Japanese never tumbled to its “Up Yours!” sarcasm.

Skirmishes

During the night of 4/5 February, an Allied bombing raid on the two bridges at Tamarkan, a little over three miles away, damaged the wooden bridge. In spite of the bombing, plans for the standard Monday concert went ahead, but they were suddenly cancelled when Noguchi claimed one of the POWs had failed to salute him.²⁸ Whether or not this accusation was true, we have seen that this rationale was commonly used to cancel a concert party in an attempt to undermine the POWs’ morale. At Kanburi, it only strengthened their resolve. “What annoys the Nips the most,” wrote Baume, “is that none of their punishments appear to have any effect on us (in fact they do) and instead of being cowed into submission we become even more ‘arrogant’!”²⁹ “Playing the opposite”—a well-known tactic in theatrical performance as well as politics—was one of the most powerful tools in the POWs’ resistance campaign.

5 February was also when Jim Jacobs, Norman Carter, and Charles Faulder arrived in Kanburi as

part of the first draft of officers from Chungkai hospital camp across the river. As they marched into camp, Carter surveyed their new home: “We passed the smoky bamboo cookhouse, the open cess pits mistakenly named latrines and then, as we turned a corner we saw, on the edge of the parade ground—a theatre! It was not so ornate as the Chungkai theatre but it looked adequate and, judging from the greyness of the atap on the roof, it was at least two years old.”³⁰ This was the small lean-to proscenium theatre seen in the background of the photograph of Harffey’s orchestra in 1944 (see **Figure 9.2**).

The morning after his arrival, Carter went to check out the theatre and found “the stage was cluttered with actors, scene shifters, and odd hangers-on, all milling around Leo Britt’s successor, British Captain Bill Maynall.” Maynall boasted that he had “gotten in first,” which meant that this was going to be “his” theatre. Carter proposed a production of the pantomime *Cinderella*, but Maynall dismissed it as too unsophisticated for an all-officers’ camp. He would continue the rehearsals of Sutton Vane’s dark fantasy-drama *Outward Bound* that Leo Britt had begun at Chungkai. Carter responded, “I can’t agree. *Outward Bound* is about shipboard passengers who are all dead and don’t know it, and that’s a morbid theme for a P.O.W. camp. But *Cinderella* is a tonic for everyone.”³¹

As a lieutenant, Carter was outranked by Maynall, so there was little he could do about the situation except hope that at some point he might be given a chance to produce his pantomime. But he knew that without his own “scenic artist, costumiere, or leading comedian” putting on the show would prove extremely difficult if not impossible.³²

Carter’s account of his conversation with Maynall is odd. He had been cast by Britt as “Mrs. Midget” in the Chungkai production of *Outward Bound*, which Maynall would surely have known. Yet he does not record any overture on Maynall’s part to have him continue in that role. As we shall see, there may have been other reasons for Maynall’s behavior.

Camp Update: Another Bombing Attack

Another bombing attack on the Tamarkan bridges took place on 13 February, this time damaging two spans of the concrete and steel bridge as well as the wooden bridge. The engineering workshop next to the officers’ camp was also attacked, and some of the bombs fell into camp, killing three POWs and wounding a dozen others. Bombs also damaged the perimeter moat and totally destroyed the new canteen.³³ While the officers were busy repairing the moat, crews of other ranks POWs from Chungkai and Tamuang were put to work repairing the wooden bridge so that train traffic could resume as quickly as possible.³⁴ Others were dispatched to repair the concrete and steel bridge.

Theatre Renovation

During the officers’ first weeks in Kanburi, the focus was on enlarging and rebuilding the entire camp to make it more livable. Realizing that once that work was done, they would have very little to do,³⁵ the POWs voluntarily took on the additional task of renovating the lean-to theatre.³⁶

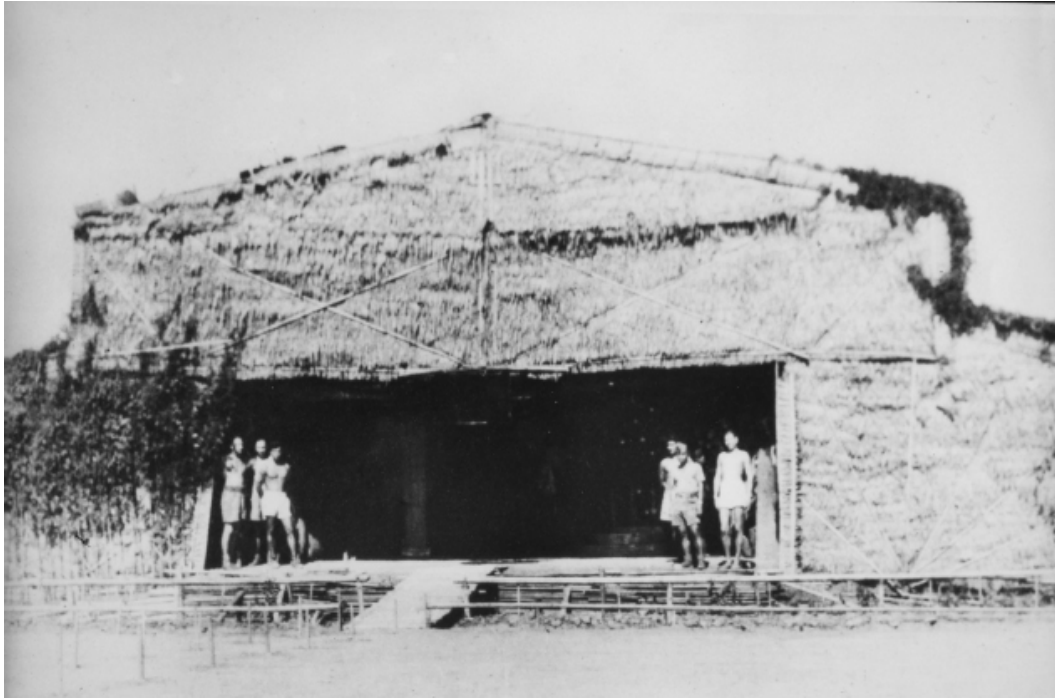


FIGURE 9.7. KANBURI CAMP THEATRE, AUGUST 1945. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL.

This photograph of the new theatre at Kanburi was taken shortly after liberation. Comparing the theatre seen here with the one visible in the background of the earlier photograph taken in 1944 (**Figure 9.2**), we note that the stagehouse has been increased to twice its former width and height. The shed-like wings on either side of the proscenium have been enlarged as well, providing generous off-stage spaces and access from the back. A ramp over the orchestra pit provided temporary access to the stage for technical work and rehearsals. The “Playhouse Presents” logo is dimly visible at the top of the header. (Further examination of this theatre and a different photograph showing the painters working onstage, is found in Chapter 11: “Out of the Blue Came Freedom” and Chapter 12: “Jolly Good Show!”).

The Kanburi Concert Party

By the middle of February, all the officers from Tamarkan and Chungkai were in Kanburi. When Major Cary Owtram saw the Kanburi Theatre for the first time, he was not impressed, disparaging it as a “theatre of sorts” which, in his opinion, “had been out of use for many months.”³⁷ By the end of the month, they were joined by the officers from the hospital at Nakhon Pathom, including many too sick to be moved but forced to do so anyway, with tragic consequences.³⁸ Captain “Fizzer” Pearson and other officer-performers were part of this group, but the band conductor, Lieutenant Norman Smith, was not yet among them.

For its small size, Kanburi Officers’ Camp would end up with an extraordinary number of musicians and entertainers in its midst—the core of many of the concert parties that had formed in the POW hospital and relocation camps in Thailand. But not all the performers were officers: other ranks’ performers had also been retained, or brought into the camp, as “cooks or batmen.”³⁹ For instance, when the classical musical conductor Eric Cliffe arrived in Kanburi from Tamuang in late January with a small

group of musicians, Harffey's ensemble was able to expand into a full-fledged orchestra.^{xii}



FIGURE 9.8. "C MINOR!" CARTOON BY FRED RANSOME SMITH. COURTESY OF FRED RANSOME SMITH.

This cartoon of Eric Cliffe tuning a fishplate—the metal piece that connected two rails—with a bolt to discover its pitch was redrawn by Lieutenant Fred Ransome “Smudger” Smith especially for this book. It is based on an original now lost.

We have little information on who out of this remarkable group of producers and performers was asked to form the Kanburi concert party. We do know a few who did not, and the reason for their exclusion is informative about camp politics and prejudices. Although Cliffe's musicians had turned his band into an orchestra, Harffey was not about to share the podium with Cliffe. And despite the fact that Majors Owtram, Pycock, and Jacobs, Captain “Fizzer” Pearson, and Lieutenants Coast, Carter, and Allum—men with extensive experience in organizing and running POW camp theatres—were all in the camp, a British Lieutenant-Colonel McOstrich was appointed as O/ic Entertainments instead. He immediately organized a committee to provide oversight of the theatre and to prevent any possible contretemps from happening between the many would-be rival producers (as in the Maynall-Carter “exchange” above). Henceforth, all producers would be required to secure approval from the committee before presenting their shows on the Kanburi stage.

Very few of these producer-directors' names were recorded. What is known is that Jacobs and Carter were not among them. In his memoir, Jacobs wrote, “Norman Carter and I took no part in these concerts, which were run almost entirely by British officers.” Jacobs went on to say that he and Carter “were

^{xii} It would now be comprised of “seven fiddles, one oboe, five clarinets, three trumpets, E [flat] horn, euphonium, guitars, accordions, drums, and string bass.” [EN 40] One of the fiddles had been ingeniously hand made from tea chests (see details about its construction in the Musical Instrument Construction section of Chapter 12: “Jolly Good Show!”).

content to sit and applaud.”⁴¹ But after their glory days at Tamarkan, this exclusion must have rankled. A few pages later, Jacobs admits, “it cannot be denied that many of the British ‘Pukka Sahibs’ still regarded all Australians as ‘colonials.’”⁴² Artistic rivalry, it appears, might not have been the only reason Jacobs and Carter were excluded from the Kanburi concert party.”

As Tamarkan was being evacuated, the costumes, props, curtains, and drops accumulated from many elaborate productions had, no doubt, been transported to Kanburi and added to the stock left from the Playhouse company. Similar items may have come from the theatre at Chungkai: Aylwin noted that, “[t]he Officers who had run the décor and dresses side at Chunglsai [*sic*] did the same job at Kanburi and equally well.”⁴³

Opening Salvos

A newly renovated theatre that would facilitate more—and more elaborate—productions, combined with the influx of officer-producers, -performers, -designers, and -technicians from other camps, all eager to continue their involvement, posed a threat to Noguchi. If he was going to break the POWs’ spirits, he would have to attack the most visible source of what kept their spirits going: their entertainment. In an attempt to limit the group’s influence, Noguchi “had its two shows a week cut down to one only (unless [he] decided to cancel it altogether).”⁴⁴

On 26 February the POWs were given a half-day holiday: that evening they had a concert but, in a further turn of Noguchi’s screw, were told it would be their last.⁴⁵ This disheartening announcement came just as the new concert party was ready to present its first variety concerts.

Several of the singing “stars” of the concert party are known to us. One was the cowboy ballad singer Larry Croisette, an original member of The Optimists (the 18th Division Concert Party) before the war.^{xiii} Three others were Bill Comyn, who could imitate American jazz singer Fats Waller; Austin Mooney, who specialized in burlesque songs taken from London revues⁴⁶ and Sergeant Bob Skilton, the only Australian.⁴⁷

Besides the concert parties, Noguchi also harassed the POWs in their everyday lives. One day following a search, Noguchi ordered the POWs to turn in all their valuables. “[T]his is the final warning, Anyone found with these things in their possession in future will be ‘severely dealt with.’”⁴⁸ Baume decided that no matter what the risk, he was going to hold on to a few of his items, including his diary.⁴⁹

Camp Update: Interrogation and Torture

At the beginning of March, the POW officers in Kanburi underwent one of their greatest trials. With information extracted by the Kempeitai through torture in other camps, it was discovered that POW administrations had been secretly cashing checks to purchase foodstuffs and medical supplies—and newspapers—through local Thai traders allowed inside the camps. To the Japanese, this meant that the POWs were in touch with the Free Thai Underground. To find out more about that network, the Kempeitai began to take officers away for interrogation and torture. In response, Colonel Toosey ordered that the camp’s secret radio immediately be buried “well underground” and disseminated instructions on “who should give who away: thus the Kempis will always go around in circles never reaching the vital centre of our resistance. There is so much, so very much at stake.”⁵⁰

^{xiii} Croisette had continued his remarkable career as a performer throughout his three years of captivity, first in Changi, then in Chungkai, and now in Kanburi Officers’ Camp.

Three Entertainers Identified

The 26 February concert turned out not to be the last after all—although the next performance that we know about did not take place until 14 March. Given the POWs' fear of keeping diaries and the absence of souvenir programs, only a very few of the performers, their names, turns, or titles of shows were remembered. Two performers whose names do appear in the records are “Fizzer” Pearson and Freddie Thompson.

As he had in other camps and other concert parties, the avuncular “Fizzer” Pearson quickly became “a camp favourite, with a fruity voice equally effective in dialogue or song.”⁵¹ He would star “in many roles that ranged from ‘Jones of the Lancers’ to aged colonels watching cricket matches and an elderly roué in tails.”⁵²

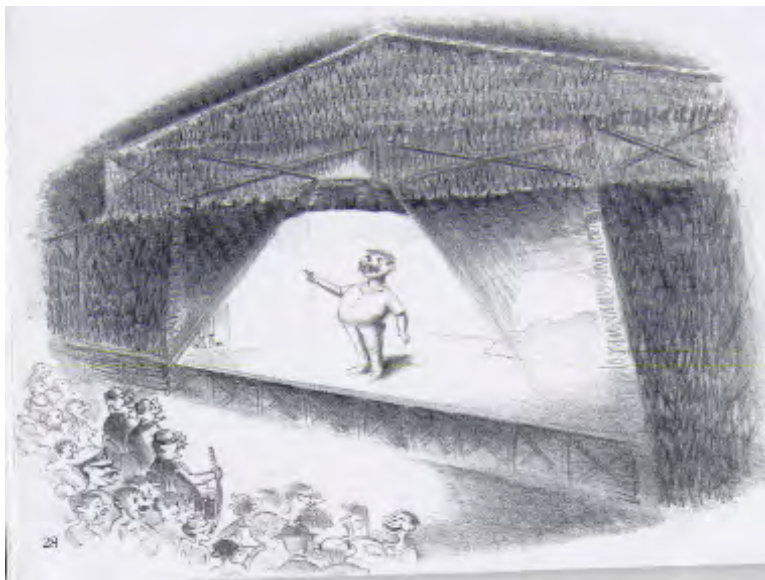


FIGURE 9.9. “FIZZER” PEARSON PERFORMING. CARTOON BY FRED RANSOME SMITH.
COURTESY OF FRED RANSOME SMITH.

This cartoon of “Fizzer” Pearson delivering one of his risqué monologues on the Kanburi stage was drawn from memory by Fred “Smudger” Smith after the war.⁵³

Freddie Thompson, who had starred in various productions at Chungkai, appeared on the Kanburi stage impersonating one of the great British music hall performers, Marie Lloyd, singing “Follow the Van,” a song she had made famous.⁵⁴

In addition, E. R. Hall remembered an unnamed comedian who presented a “superbly acted” “Hot-Dog Seller” sketch that “drew thunderous applause as he complained that a buyer who did not want mustard on his hot-dog created unemployment for the mustard makers and put so many families in dire straits just because he did not like mustard.”⁵⁵

Noguchi’s New Tactics: “No Laughing, No Clapping

Whether in response to this incidence of “thunderous applause” or others like it, Noguchi’s next attempt to kill the POWs’ enthusiasm for entertainment was the imposition of a no-laughing, no clapping

ban that would prevent the POWs from responding spontaneously or expressing appreciation to the performers for their efforts.⁵⁶ It confirms that Noguchi's means for defeating the POWs in the "battle for concerts" would be tactical and psychological. His goal was to discourage POW entertainers from wanting to perform and POW audiences from wanting to attend the shows. The effect of this no-laughing, no-clapping policy on the comedians, in particular, can only be imagined. But, in reply, they devilishly tried to get their audiences to laugh out loud anyway.

No Rehearsals

Seeing that his no-laughing, no-clapping ban did not deter further performances or attendance, Noguchi next attempted to frustrate the entertainers' abilities to produce shows at all by forbidding rehearsals from taking place. Noguchi's rationale for this ban was recorded by C. D. L. Aylwin: "They pointed out that in their army concerts were always impromptu. That probably accounts for why when I saw two performances they seemed incredibly dull. Even the Jap. audience seemed bored and restless. On the other hand although they couldn't have understood it, they seemed to enjoy our lively and colourful concerts with their cheerful dresses, décor and singing."⁵⁷ Since it was true that the Japanese soldiers and Korean guards also depended on the POW shows to keep their own spirits going as well, Noguchi must have been under pressure from his own troops to reverse his no-rehearsal policy.⁵⁸

But the POWs' resistance could be tactical and psychological as well. "Following a week when the [unrehearsed] concert had been a bigger flop than usual," wrote Aylwin, "the Jap. Camp Commandant was informed that owing to no rehearsals being allowed, no concert would be given the following Monday." As a result of this tactic and repeated requests, Noguchi "finally permitted rehearsals for 1 hour daily between 20.30 and 21.30, which was meager allowance."⁵⁹

Being forced to make this concession by what he must have considered a clever maneuver involved Noguchi in a personal loss of face that demanded repayment: "True to Nip form . . . the following week the Jap. Commander went personally to see the dress rehearsal on the Sunday evening. At the end of it he said there would be no concert on the Monday evening as it was not yet sufficiently rehearsed!"⁶⁰

This final round of the current "battle" obviously went to Noguchi—and he was not averse to pressing his advantage: "About a fortnight after this, the Band were discovered still rehearsing at 21.40, ten minutes after the permitted rehearsal hours. The Jap. Camp Commander then forbade all rehearsal and concerts but some days later he relented. From this it will be gathered that the weekly concert was by no means a certainty."⁶¹

"Speako!"

One turn in a variety show that possibly took place during this contentious period is J. H. H. Coombes' account of a ventriloquist performance—a routine that had unintended consequences for the performer:

One "concert incidental" gave all but the victima good laugh:—a Dutch officer who could ventriloquize, made a doll, and gave an excellent "turn" which impressed even the Nip. Three days later, there was one of the periodic searches, and the Nip, searching the Dutch hut found and recognized the doll. He picked it up and said: "Speako!"—but the doll never said a word. Angrily, he slapped its

face and ordered: “Speako!”—still no response, more face slapping of the doll, a crescendo of staccato abuse, and a bellowed: “Speako!”

The doll never said a word.

He threw it through the window, and sent for the owner off a working party, slapped his face, and made him stand to attention outside the guard room for twelve hours as a punishment because his doll wouldn’t speak.⁶²

No Speako!

Besides Bill Maynall, who was well into final rehearsals for his production of *Outward Bound*, a new dramatics group under the leadership of Lieutenant Michael Curtis had formed to put on Shakespeare’s *Richard II*.^{xiv} Stephen Alexander was part of this group of aspiring thespians:

We made all the beginner’s mistakes of over-emphasis and textual blunders, and Mike patiently showed us how it should be done. “I’m afraid this will be a bit ham,” he would say and then, gathering his G-string round him like a regal cloak, transfix us with the deposition scene:

*Now mark me how I will undo myself.
I give this heavy weight from off my head,
And this unwieldy sceptre from my hand,
The pride of kingly sway from out my heart;
With my own tears I wash away my balm.*⁶³

This speech from the famous “deposition scene” was banned in Shakespeare’s own day as too politically dangerous. Curtis must have thought that the play about the overthrow of an ineffectual ruler would send a message of hope to the POWs in the audience. And because it was a classic Shakespearean play—with language difficult for the Japanese to understand—he could get it past the censor.

When Noguchi got wind of the fact that two groups were going to produce plays—spoken dramas—he immediately sought to put a stop to their plans. Plays would offer occasions, he believed, for the actors to communicate covert messages to their audiences about the status of the war.

By this point some Japanese censors had become sophisticated enough to know that it wasn’t only the words of the text they had to worry about—after all, the texts had to be submitted to them for approval before the performance, and they could cross out anything that was suspect. The possible metaphorical meaning of the dramatic action concerned them as well.⁶⁴ If Noguchi had been informed of the titles and content of the two plays now in rehearsal, his suspicions would have been confirmed: *Outward Bound* could easily be interpreted as “homeward bound,” and *Richard II*, of course, was about a ruler’s removal from power.

Noguchi took this opportunity to put a stop not only to these two productions but to any future attempts to produce dramatic works as well. He reissued his list of entertainment restrictions, which contained the usual “no applause of any kind allowed at the concerts” and “no matter of a patriotic or

^{xiv} Curtis had been a writer and producer of mystery-thriller plays in Nong Pladuk.

marital nature to be included in the concert programmes,” and revised his ruling on censorship to state that “all concert items [were] to be censored . . . before rehearsals commence” rather than the standard practice of censoring them before a performance was given. But the new addition to his list was the clincher: “No spoken word allowed at the concerts. Singing only allowed, plus music.”⁶⁵ This ruling became known as the “no-speaking” ban.

Carter learned about this latest restriction as he watched the scenic artists and technicians preparing the stage for the dress rehearsals of *Outward Bound*. A typewritten notice from I. J. A. headquarters was delivered announcing the ban, and “Bill Maynall, his artists, scene shifters, property men and the cast of *Outward Bound* left the stage and walked slowly back to their huts, leaving the theatre to the minna birds and the scorpions.”⁶⁶ Knowing what kind of limited entertainment this ban would produce, Carter decided to make no further comments on the entertainment in Kanburi in his memoir.

But when Michael Curtis heard the news, he got the POW administration to push back, arguing that the Japanese had already given them permission to produce a Shakespearean play. Terence Charley recorded their response: “& they said ‘Oh yes, they had heard of Shakespeare & would we come & read them a representative extract.’ ‘Yes we would.’ Ian Watt was deputed to do this but since the piece he chose was King Henry’s speech before the battle of Agincourt^{xv} it is, perhaps, not surprising that the Japanese remained unrelenting. . . . Such sentiments were hardly calculated to allay Japanese suspicions that we were only awaiting a favourable opportunity to rise up & do them all in.”⁶⁷ *Richard II* was not approved for performance

Mum’s the Word

This no-speaking ban was imposed on all future productions. As Aylwin understood the order, “the Japs would only permit music, singing and dancing but no talking except to announce items.”⁶⁸ But he also reported that it didn’t take long for the wily entertainers to figure out a way around this newest restriction:

One amusing show was put on entitled “Mum’s the Word” [in which] some very funny acts were put on in which there were no stage props and the players performed in dumb show. It was very funny. ⁶⁹

Given this unexpected interpretation of their no-speaking ban, the Japanese moved quickly to clarify this misunderstanding of their intent: “the [new] orders actually stated that there was ‘to be no acting or miming.’” But in a flanking manoeuvre, Aylwin noted, the entertainers “put a broad interpretation on the orders and got away with it.”⁷⁰

A further casualty of the no-speaking ban were the variety shows with their dependence on comic sketches; only band concerts and revues continued to be produced. And since everything now had to be sung, “the estimable Mr. Bywaters produced an endless stream of excellent lyrics that were both amusing & suggestive.”⁷¹ “Biggles” Bywaters had arrived in Kanburi along with Eric Cliffe and the other officers from Tamuang. He had already built a reputation for writing witty lyrics for Norman Smith’s songs in shows back in Changi, Singapore, as well as in Chungkai.

^{xv} A rousing speech spurring the troops on to victory in the upcoming battle.

Camp Update: “Bridge Tournament”

On 22 March another bombing raid took place on the nearby bridges. Kanburi was also attacked because just before the bombers struck, the Japanese quickly moved a train from where it had been stationed in an open, vulnerable spot and parked it next door to the POW camp’s cookhouses. “Most of the bombs,” Baume wrote, “fell on and around the canteen and stage, severely damaging the huts as well as the bund just behind.” Three POWs were killed in the raid and others seriously injured.⁷² The stage itself, however, was not damaged.

In retaliation, Noguchi further tightened restrictions on the POWs’ activities, not only canceling entertainment but limiting when and where they could read or smoke, removing half of their washing-up buckets, and prohibiting them from visiting in huts other than their own.⁷³

At the beginning of April, repairs to the wooden bridge at Tamarkan were completed and the first train tentatively made its way across. That same afternoon, Allied long-range bombers appeared and blew the bridge to smithereens. These raids gave the POWs in Kanburi enormous hope. Baume cheekily labeled his account of the raid “Bridge Tournament” and went on to say, “We feel that the end, whatever it may be, is approaching fast and that we are rushing towards the Grand Finale for which we have been waiting, praying, dreaming, for over three long years.”⁷⁴

In an apparent attempt to dampen that renewed spirit, lectures, which—in addition to the entertainment—had been crucial in preserving morale as well as keeping the prisoners’ minds active, were now banned, and no more than ten POWs were allowed to gather in a group at one time.⁷⁵ Once again, the prisoners cleverly outwitted their captors. Lectures continued to be given as the men sat near each other in small groups that faced different directions. When a sentry intruded, the members of each group reverted to talking among themselves.⁷⁶

“The Battle for Concerts Continues”

So far, Noguchi’s restrictions had not prohibited entertainment altogether. He preferred to retain his ability to use the POWs’ beloved concert parties for intimidation and control. Besides, as the prisoners themselves noted, it wasn’t only their morale that would be affected if the entertainments were cancelled completely. “The Japanese—both officers and men—were so depressed by the absence of our shows,” Charles Fisher observed, “that, after a lull of some weeks, it was decided that they could be resumed, though with a proviso that there must be no speaking on the stage.”⁷⁷ Since there already was a no-speaking ban in effect, this should be understood as extension of that order that now banned all announcements of playbill turns by compères or title selections by orchestra conductors.

Round One

Noguchi’s frequent banning of rehearsals and concerts at the slightest provocation, as well as tight restrictions on their content and reception, became a cross the Kanburi POWs had to bear. Even Gus Harffey’s leadership of the band did not survive Noguchi’s vindictive need to retaliate for any slight, real or imaginary.

Gus Harffey’s orchestra was one of the most popular acts on the Kanburi stage. “I never hear the Bobby Howes–Binnie Hale number, ‘Spread a Little Happiness,’” John Durnford wrote, “without remembering Gus Harffey, immaculate in a white cricket shirt and slacks, waving the baton negligently as the curtains opened.”⁷⁸ Watching the amateur bass viol player trying to reproduce techniques he had seen in professional dance bands also provided much enjoyment: “The double-bass player was a simple

soul, often carried away by the excitement of ‘Bounce Me Brother with a Solid Four’ into revolving the instrument on its own axis, giving little happy cries,” Durnford remembered. “It was a source of great amusement to the audience when, as often happened, the double-bass finished spinning wrong-side up.”⁷⁹

As we’ve seen with regard to the contest over rehearsals, relations between the concert party and Noguchi were already contentious, so no matter how many points he might score with the POWs it was unwise of Harffey to make Noguchi lose face again. Baume recorded the story of Harffey’s provocation and his subsequent downfall.

The battle for concerts continues. Some time ago, when rehearsals and concert parties had been stopped, Neguchi [*sic*] was showing a rival Nip camp commandant round the Camp to impress him with the wisdom and kindness with which Kambouri [*sic*] is being run. . . . As a final treat, the rival was to be shown the band in action on the stage. Therefore Neguchi gave permission to Gus Harvey [*sic*], the leader, to rehearse after supper.

So when the important visitors arrived and took their seats on the stage, Gus did rehearse and played the same bars of music over and over again. Neguchi was furious; Gus was hauled up in front of him and finally given the sack. Norman Smith, from Chungkai, took his place.⁸⁰

Norman Smith Takes Over. One of the last officers to arrive in Kanburi was the musical conductor Norman Smith, who had come from Chungkai via Nakhon Pathom in early April. When he first saw Harffey’s band, he speculated on how the larger musical instruments, like the drum and bass viol, had made it into the camp—“probably on bamboo bearers [disguised as heavy sick POWs] as the guards had not bothered to check the baggage or stretcher cases.”⁸¹ He also noted with relief that their precious “accumulated library of music and scripts had been preserved” by Eric Cliffe at Tamuang and brought into the camp as well.⁸²

From Aylwin’s point of view, Harffey’s removal was actually a good move: “The Camp benefited by the change because the running of the band was henceforth done jointly by 2 Officers [Norman Smith and Eric Cliffe] more experienced in music and one had a bent for dance music and the other classical. The resulting concerts were all of a higher standard and if only longer periods for rehearsal had been permitted would have vied with Chunglsai [Chungkai] standards.”⁸³ If he had known about Aylwin’s assessment, Cliffe would have heartily disagreed. He claimed that it was in Kanburi Officers’ Camp that they were able to form the largest and best orchestra of their captivity.⁸⁴

Rounds Two and Three

But Harffey’s ouster and replacement was only the first in a new series of scuffles: “Some time later, the Nips suddenly said we could have a concert (they wanted it for themselves) but Toosey declined the offer because, as we had been unable to hold any rehearsals, we could not possibly put one on.”⁸⁵

This requested concert would most likely have been to celebrate the Japanese emperor’s birthday on 29 April. In other POW camps this was always the occasion for a command performance. Refusing would cause problems: “Round 3 came to-day [30 April], and this one we lost! The ban on concerts was lifted and so, taking advantage of it, Toosey asked the Frog [Lieutenant Takasaki, Noguchi’s second in

command] for permission to hold a concert. The Frog replied politely that, as we have not been rehearsing lately, we would surely be unable to put one on and therefore the request was pointless!”⁸⁶ Lieutenant Takasaki had been well tutored by his commanding officer.

But now that the ban was lifted, Kanburi entertainment picked up where it had left off: orchestral concerts alternated weekly with musical revues. Norman Carter described one of Norman Smith’s concerts:

The conductor, appreciating the value of time and that the Nips might at any moment ban the performance with a curt “Concerto no good kenah!” did not bother bowing to his audience; he merely lifted his baton and the show was on. The orchestra played a grand selection of pops and semi-classicals, but while the “Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairies” aroused great enthusiasm, there were those who running their eyes over the gaunt frames squatting beside them, wondered if Saint Saens’ “Dance of the Skeletons” was not a trifle tactless.⁸⁷

The revue *Balalaika* opened on 7 May, one of the few Kanburi productions for which we have a title and date.⁸⁸ This condensed version of the 1936 West End revue starred “Fizzer” Pearson, who, as he had done in other camps, repeated “Fizzer’s Flute,” the song Smith and Bywaters had written for him back in Changi. Its final verse is given here:

*When I get back home at last on England’s happy shore . . .
I think that I shall never visit Thailand any more . . .
I’ll go into some posh hotel and order something nice
And wash it down with good old ale, no matter what the price,
And I’ll tell them what to do with it, if they serve me up with rice.*⁸⁹

Finding themselves in the same camp again, Smith and “Biggles” Bywaters teamed up once more to create a series of sparkling original musical revues, which in Terence Charley’s eyes were full “of more than ordinary salaciousness.”⁹⁰ Biggles’ racy lyrics from “I’m a Deb” might justify Charley’s comment.

*Now I’m a Deb.
Such a trustful rather lustful little Deb.
They say my coming-out affair will stupefy the town:
It won’t be what is coming out, but what is coming down.
What a whirl
For a highly shrewd and interviewed young girl.
‘The Sketch’ insist I’m shy, pure as any maiden aunt,*

*'The Daily Mirror' tackles me from quite another slant,
 Whilst the 'Sporting and Dramatic'
 Say I'm hot stuff in the attic,
 And this year's most attractive Debutante.⁹¹*

[The complete lyrics for these and other songs by "Biggles" Bywaters can be found in "The FEPOW Songbook."]

Noguchi's Magnanimity

As he had done back in Chungkai, Norman Smith turned over the orchestra to Eric Cliffe for a monthly concert of classical music. The first of these "Promenade Concerts" took place a week later. As unlikely as it sounds, it was Noguchi who had facilitated the show: "A little time ago," Baume wrote, "we asked Noguchi [*sic*] to be kind enough to purchase some music for us in Bangkok; he was only too pleased to be able to prove his magnanimity and brought quite a few scores back."⁹²

Fred "Smudger" Smith designed the stage setting for this concert. "I remember modeling large heads of Mozart & Beethoven in clay," he wrote, "& placing them in painted alcoves either side of the stage. The clay was kindly brought in by a party working on enormously enlarging the bund (moat) around the camp—very ominous."⁹³

Three POWs remembered the powerful effect this concert of classical music had on them. Stephen Alexander wrote glowingly about it:

As we sat in the mud, keeping the mosquitoes at bay with our "Sikh's Beard" [camp-made cigarettes] and watching the fruit bats scuttering in and out of the improvised limelight, the plangent strains of Prucell and Handel would give way to thumping chunks of Grieg, "The New World Symphony," "Leonora" and *The Barber of Seville*. And as for 'Finlandia,' I could positively see the Russians being swept away and feel, with a catch in the throat and smarting eyes, the snowflakes settling on my sweaty skin.⁹⁴

Durnford, not knowing how the music had been acquired, assumed this concert was another example of the musicians' abilities of total recall.⁹⁵ And Aylwin, noting the variety and complexity of the program (which also contained a movement from Mozart's "Violin Concerto"), concluded, "All difficulties considered, it was an excellent performance talked of for many weeks after."⁹⁶

Following the war, Cliffe wrote about the seemingly insurmountable barriers to rehearsing and presenting promenade concerts in Kanburi:

No Paper— had to make it.

No music—had to remember it.^{xvi}

^{xvi} As we know, this is an overstatement.

Kept 8 copyists busy under nerve-wracking conditions—not allowed writing materials—⁹⁷



FIGURE 9.10. SHEET MUSIC ON PAPER MADE FROM RICE SACKS. IWM MISC 66 (1021).

With the ban on possession of writing instruments and materials, it was, ironically, Noguchi who had encouraged the POWs to start a paper-making operation.⁹⁸ It was a chemist in the camp who devised the process by which good paper could be manufactured from rice sacks.⁹⁹

To the POWs delight, Noguchi's acquisition of orchestral music in Bangkok had an additional dividend. His "magnanimity" had blinded him to the fact that a Thai merchant in Bangkok had wrapped the musical scores he had purchased "in a recent edition of the Bangkok Chronicle," thus allowing the POWs to read the latest news about the war.¹⁰⁰

The "Drower Incident"

On 25 May the Kanburi POWs were elated to learn via their secret radio, recently brought out of hiding and put back in operation, that Germany had collapsed, Hitler was dead, Rangoon had been recaptured, and "heavy air raids on Japanese cities continued."¹⁰¹

Three days later, the "Drower Incident"—one of the most notorious on the Thailand-Burma railway—occurred. Various reports of this episode, each with slightly different versions of its cause, exist. What follows has been largely taken from Major Jacobs' account.

On 28 May, a British officer working in the pump house refused to fill a bucket of water for a Japanese private. This infraction was reported to Noguchi, who sent for the interpreter. Since the regular interpreter was ill, Captain William Drower, who had been attached as an interpreter to "A Force" in Burma, went instead. When questioned about what rights a British POW officer had, Drower stated that it was wrong to make an officer obey a request from a Japanese private. In response, "Noguchi flew into a tearing rage, and savagely attacked Bill with its sword stick, knocking him down and grappling with him

on the floor. Lieut. Takasaki (The Frog) joined in the attack, and so severe was the melee that the Jap office was wrecked.”¹⁰²

Drower had unwittingly given Noguchi just the provocation he needed to take out all of his hostility toward the officers, its ferocity fueled, no doubt, by news of recent Japanese losses. Drower was placed in solitary confinement in a waterlogged hole which had been dug as an air raid shelter. He was served one bowl of rice and a mug of water a day. Colonel Toosey and other officers tried repeatedly to have his sentence overturned, to no avail. Drower remained in solitary confinement for eighty-six days. During his incarceration, Noguchi tried every means possible to mentally and physically break him. According to Jacobs, Drower, in moments of despair and temporary insanity, made two attempts at suicide.¹⁰³

As a result of this incident, life in Kanburi Officers’ Camp became more tense and restrictive. Noguchi tried to drive a wedge between the officers and the other ranks by informing the officers that since they had objected to work, they would henceforth be forbidden to do any. The other ranks would have to handle all the camp fatigues on top of their other assignments. Unwilling to let Noguchi think he had found a weak spot—their care and concern for their men—the officers performed another grand charade of “playing the opposite.” In apparent disregard for the fate of their men, the officers spent their new free time “walking round and round the Camp in an endless procession, talking and joking and watching the looks of annoyance on the Nips faces.” The other ranks were “browned-off” by these latest developments but continued to fully support their officers. “How long,” Baume pondered, “can we continue?”¹⁰⁴

Charades

Seeing that his latest tactic for forcing the POW officers to bend to his will had failed, Noguchi upped the ante. That night, as the result of another minor infraction of his rules, he banned all entertainment activities and confined the officers to their huts for an indefinite period of time. They were allowed outside only for their meals, washing, and toilet needs.¹⁰⁵ Baume recorded Toosey’s strategy in response to this forced detention: “We have received a warning that the Nips are gunning for us and are probably trying to provoke the long-awaited incident that will give them the excuse to open fire on us. . . . Toosey has appealed to all to obey implicitly every new Nip regulation, however trivial, so as to give them no excuse at all—it will be difficult but the alternative will be worse. Roll on the end!”¹⁰⁶

Cary Owtram voiced the officers’ defiant attitude: “The Japanese thought that this treatment would subdue us and break what they called our ‘obdurate spirit,’ but in fact it had the opposite effect and the more offensive they became, the more our spirits rose.”¹⁰⁷

During their detention, new “chicken-shit” regulations were instituted daily: “reading has been stopped, games are not allowed, talks are forbidden, smoking is restricted, we have just to sit at the end of the bamboo bali [bed-platform] and wait, staring at the all too familiar faces of our opposite numbers.”¹⁰⁸



FIGURE 9.11. KANBURI OFFICERS' CAMP HUT INTERIOR. PHOTOGRAPHER JOHN MUNSLOW WILLIAMS. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL.

This photograph, also taken secretly by John Munslow Williams, shows the interior of a POW accommodation hut at Kanburi. Visible on either side of a wide central aisle are the raised bamboo sleeping platforms the POWs sat on during their enforced confinement.

Once again the officers found a way to maintain their sanity and control over their lives. This time their solution was playing charades in dumb show and giving lectures *sotto voce*.¹⁰⁹ For Jacobs, “The spectacle of grown men gesticulating, and distorting their faces as they acted the chosen word in dumb show was ludicrous in the extreme, but it did help to pass away the time.”¹¹⁰ To Norman Carter, though, it wasn’t the latest harsh restrictions that made the POWs “almost despair, it was the silencing of the orchestra and the closing of the theatre.”¹¹¹

Then, on 14 June, after a fortnight of being confined to their huts and without a word of explanation, the officers were released. Shortly afterward, Noguchi informed Toosey that they were going to be transferred to Nakhon Nayok, a new airfield construction camp northeast of Bangkok. In two weeks, Toosey and an advance party of four hundred fit POW officers would leave to prepare the camp. Others would follow periodically until everyone had been moved to the new site.

“Swinging on a Strap”

Four days after the officers’ release, concert party performances roared back to life as if the forced isolation had prompted an “outpouring of spirit” in compensation for their deprivation. *A Bench in the Park*, the latest revue from Smith and Bywaters, which had been in rehearsal before their confinement, featured at least one song, “Swinging on a Strap,” in which Bywaters proved that not all of his lyrics had to be salacious. “It was a new, easily-remembered melody,” wrote Durnford, “depicting four strap-hangers in the London tube. We were becoming sentimental about London, and our thoughts were turning towards home.”¹¹² The first verse reveals Bywaters’ verbal abilities in capturing the hustle of London life:

*Rush hour. Rush hour.
Taxi ramming, traffic jamming,*

*Window slamming, carriage cramming
 Wary workers shuffle to the tempo of the street.
 Everywhere the rhythm of a million milling feet.*

In the chorus, it is almost possible to see the four singers hanging onto their straps in the underground carriages:

*Swinging on a strap, every morning, every evening, every day,
 Looking at a map whether coming, whether going either way.
 Typist from suburbia adjacent to a Judge,
 Looking so embarrassed at that accidental nudge.
 Tightly packed together so that neither one can budge.
 Grasping frantically, unromantically,
 Swaying on a strap as we rumble and we tumble neath the town:
 Looking for a lap if we're suddenly invited to sit down.
 Smiling at the pretty girls and frowning at the plain,
 Craning eager necks to glimpse the latest strip of Jane
 We're swinging on a strap, any morning, any evening, any day.¹¹³*

[The complete lyrics for "Swinging on a Strap" can be found in "The FEPOW Songbook." There it is also possible to listen to a vocal and instrumental rendition of this song.]

Bywaters' abilities to turn a phrase were widely praised. "Clever topical verses on camp events and personalities were written by an English officer," observed Jacobs, "whose brilliant satires drew roars of appreciation from the audience."¹¹⁴ (Roars of appreciation were not laughing or clapping!)

Other Ranks John Durnford preserved fragments of some of these topical and satirical lyrics in his memoir because he had sung them himself. After watching numerous productions in various POW camps over the previous three years, Durnford finally succumbed to the lure of the stage, becoming one of Kanburi's leading female impersonators.¹¹⁵ His first solo came in a show that re-created the "Kensington Girls of Kensington Gore" number from a revue in London's Gate Theatre with a parody of the original lyrics by Bywaters.

*My name is Belinda, I'm burnt to a cinder
 By India's blistering heat,
 I share with the colonel, my parent paternal,
 A ménage not gaudy but neat.*

*Though we're in retirement, I do what I can
By playing at Eve to the right sort of man,
Helping the nation without hesitation,
Girls from Kensington Gore.*¹¹⁶

There were three more verses, each one sung by a different impersonator, all of whom, from Charles Fisher's perspective, "shimmered on to the stage looking like dreams and singing like nightmares."¹¹⁷ In a later show these same impersonators, described by Durnford as a "quartet of grumbling and unwilling men," would repeat the song with a new set of lyrics. For this second production, Bywaters rewrote the lyrics as an "unmalicious satire on Malayan wives and sweethearts, mainly for the benefit of the planters and miners in the audience."^{xvii}

Chorus: *We're Singapore Girls from Singapore Town,
Rather hard-up, and often run-down,
Living our lives a la Somerset Maugham
With a tropical man in a tropical storm.*

Solo: *I'm Lady Medusa, a Social Who's-Whoser,
I married the Governor last week.
I traveled out steerage, me mind on a peerage,
And now I'm half-way—so to speak—
At Government House parties they say I'm a pest,
But Coward preferred me above all the rest,
One of the season's most promising fillies.
[Girls from Singapore Town.]*¹¹⁸

These lyrics are a superb example of Bywaters' skills at multiple entendre (see more about their implications in Chapter 14: "Somebody Had to Put a Skirt On.")

Two other female impersonators—and perhaps the actual "leading ladies" of the Kanburi Concert Party—were thought by Jim Jacobs to be "very convincing": "One in particular, known as 'Sylvia Ray' [Syd Ray],^{xviii} had not only good looks, but was a graceful dancer. Another, known as 'Popsie' [Saunders], specialized in rather risqué monologues."¹¹⁹ But the Australian singer Bob Skilton knew there was an even better female impersonator in the camp. "Anxious to show what a fair dinkum Aussie female impersonator could do," noted Jacobs, Skilton tried to persuade Lieutenant Ted Weller "to join the concert party, but

^{xvii} Officers in the Federated Malay Volunteer Forces and the Straits Settlement Volunteer Forces.

^{xviii} Syd Ray had been in the earliest Kanburi concert party back in 1944.

Teddy steadfastly refused. He pledged himself not to appear on the stage again after his long run of success at Tamarkan.”¹²⁰

Camp Update: Direct Hits

On 24 June, Allied bombers in new low-level runs hit the bridges at Tamarkan. The wooden bridge was demolished once again, and direct hits on the steel bridge finally put it out of commission for the rest of the war. Four days later, Toosey departed Kanburi with the advance party for their new camp at Nakhon Nayok.¹²¹ Upholding tradition, the Kanburi band was on hand to send them on their way: “They left in the middle of the night,” Baume wrote, “in pouring rain, marching out of the camp to the doleful strains of music played by a cold, wet and hungry band. When, we all wonder, shall we see them again?”¹²² Each week more drafts would leave Kanburi for their new camp.

Five days later, an N. E. I. production called *The Holland Show* opened in honor of Prince Bernard’s birthday. (This Dutch production is the only one we know of that took place in Kanburi, although there surely must have been others.) *The Holland Show* was a revue staged by Arie Grendel that showcased traditional Dutch sailor songs and peasant dances replete with regional costumes and customs of the Netherlands.

Two full-color renderings by Peter Bernard for men’s and women’s costumes for this show survived because he hid them in a hollowed-out bamboo so they would not be confiscated.¹²³ From these sketches, it’s possible to see what elaborate costumes were constructed in the camp.



FIGURE 9.12. COSTUME RENDERING FOR MALE AND FEMALE COSTUMES BY PETER BERNARD. IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEUM, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

In early July, plans had been made for another of Eric Cliffe’s classical music concerts, but it never took place. Cliffe must have suddenly taken ill and been placed in hospital. In order not to disappoint the troops, what went on instead, as Alexander remembered it, was the performance of a mock symphony

concert with a brilliant comic as the conductor:

One night we had some excellent musical slapstick in a performance of ‘The Hall of the Mountain King,’ with a kind of Professor Strabismus conducting. The orchestra was always pretty odd, with an accordion acting as piano, saxophones as clarinets and tubas as French horns, but the Mad Professor added to the confusion by arranging for a succession of anomalies, such as left-handed or one-armed players; these he would stop in mid-cadenza and react to with increasing frenzy. His relief at approaching the finale was so strong that on the first long-drawn-out climatic chords he would turn to the audience with the lowest of self-congratulatory bows, the string hair from his wig flapping over his eyes, only to be brought up short by the orchestra continuing to play behind him. Spinning round, he would catch them up in time to repeat his bow after the next climax, and be caught out again in the same way—and, of course, of course, yet again by the real ending when it came, which he had treated as a pause.¹²⁴

From this point on, it appears the POWs were able to produce their shows weekly without any further interference or harassment from Noguchi. The sudden change in his attitude and behavior was due, no doubt, to the fact that he had also received marching orders to leave Kanburi in order to take command of the new aerodrome camp at Nakhon Nayok.

According to Durnford, two other shows put on during this period were large-cast, large-scale productions. One was *Three O’Clock in the Morning*, “a song-pageant of English history dreamed up by an officer who had never yet had anything produced but wanted to have a go” that the theatre committee “in a weak moment . . . allowed . . . to go on.” It was a flop.¹²⁵

The other show, “a South American extravaganza . . . [that] needed carefully rehearsed dance routines and harmony groups,” was, by comparison, a huge success. “The show’s centre-piece was an all-dancing, all-singing, on-stage full chorus of a new song by Norman Smith ‘The Caravanny.’”^{xix126} Aylwin thought the “song and scene was first class.”¹²⁷

“The Happy Ending”

Since the beginning of August, anticipation of an end to years of incarceration had been building among the POWs at Kanburi:

For all of us [wrote Durnford], knowing the end was near, had begun to echo the sentiments of Austin [Mooney]’s last and most famous song, “The Happy Ending,” borrowed from a pre-war Gate revue:

*I want a Mister and a Miss,
Some Moonlight and a Kiss,*

^{xix} The Smith piece has not survived.

*I want to see them both united,
But that's not all—I must have
The Happy Ending.¹²⁸*

Their happy ending was not far off, but the POWs would first have to endure one final blow to their entertainment from the vindictive Noguchi. Though he had limited the number of shows and rehearsals, prevented audiences from laughing or clapping, and, finally, forbidden any words to be spoken from the stage, the POWs had still found ways around those restrictions in order to produce entertainment that kept their morale high. Now that he was leaving, Noguchi used his authority to deliver a coup de grace to what he believed was their source of hope by cancelling concert party performances altogether—and permanently.¹²⁹ This was his “happy ending” to the contest of wit and will in the “battle for concerts.”

When Noguchi left for Nakhon Nayok on 10 August, the POWs, in an audacious gambit, hid the parts of their secret radio in his baggage to escape detection so that it could be safely transported to their new camp.¹³⁰ By this subterfuge, the POWs, in turn, scored a final triumph over their hated jailer.

After Noguchi's departure, life in Kanburi under Lieutenant Matsushita, the new Japanese commandant, became noticeably more relaxed. A number of Noguchi's repressive rules and regulations were simply forgotten, although, as ordered, there were no further concert parties.¹³¹ On 15 August, Jim Jacobs and Norman Carter left Kanburi with the next draft en route to Nakhon Nayok.

Then, on 16 August, as the next party of officers was preparing to leave, the Japanese surrender was announced, and the Kanburi POWs had their happy ending. They were free at last.

Endnotes

- 1 Toosey, Report, 19.
- 2 Baume, 163.
- 3 Coast, 213.
- 4 Chippington, 490.
- 5 Braddon, 238-239.
- 6 Braddon, 239.
- 7 Mills, 136.
- 8 IWM Misc 116 Item 1834.
- 9 Note attached to photograph in IWM collection; identities also confirmed by Wilbur Smith.
- 10 Wilbur Smith, Telephone interview, 12 May 2004.
- 11 Coast, 210.
- 12 Toosey, Report, 20.
- 13 Toosey, Report, 20.
- 14 Toosey, Report, 20.
- 15 Baume, 154.
- 16 Baume, 153.
- 17 Baume, 153.
- 18 Jacobs, 142.
- 19 Toosey, Report, 20.
- 20 Summers, 268.
- 21 Jacobs, 142.
- 22 Toosey, Report, 20.

23	Jacobs, 136.
24	Baume, 152.
25	Toosey, Report, 20.
26	Jacobs, 136; Baume, 152.
27	Baume, 152-153.
28	Baume, 154.
29	Baume, 155.
30	Carter, 184-185.
31	Carter, 185.
32	Carter, 186.
33	Owtram, 171; Coast, 215.
34	Jacobs, 143.
35	Toosey, Report, 20.
36	Owtram, 173.
37	Owtram, 173.
38	Baume, 158.
39	N. Smith, 62.
40	Cliffe, "Orchestras," 5.
41	Jacobs, 138.
42	Jacobs, 142.
43	Aylwin, 1945 Folder, 2c.
44	Coast, 213.
45	Baume, 156.
46	Durnford, 178-179.
47	Durnford, 178-179.
48	Durnford, 178-179.
49	Durnford, 178-179.
50	Baume, 158-159.
51	Alexander, 185.
52	Durnford, 177-178.
53	F. R. Smith, "... more memories," 28.
54	Chippington, 490.
55	Hall, 201.
56	Coombes, 117.
57	Aylwin, 1945 Folder, 1c-2c.
58	Fisher, 100.
59	Aylwin, 1945 Folder, 1c-2c.
60	Aylwin, 1945 Folder, 1c-2c.
61	Aylwin, 1945 Folder, 2c.
62	Coombes, 152.
63	Alexander, 185-186.
64	Pritchard, "the undefeated," 1-2.
65	Jacobs, 140.
66	Carter, 187.
67	Charley, 49-50.
68	Aylwin, 1945 Folder, 1c.
69	Aylwin, 1945 Folder, 2c.
70	Aylwin, 1945 Folder, 1c.
71	Charley, 50.
72	Baume, 158.
73	Baume, 159.
74	Baume, 161.
75	Baume, 162.
76	Aylwin, 1945 Folder, 1c.

77	Fisher, 100.
78	Durnford, 176-177.
79	Durnford, 177.
80	Baume, 163.
81	N. Smith, 62.
82	N. Smith, 62.
83	Aylwin, 1945 Folder, 2c.
84	Cliffe, "Orchestras," 5.
85	Baume, 163.
86	Baume, 163.
87	Baume, 163.
88	Baume, 164.
89	N. Smith, 135.
90	Charley, 50.
91	N. Smith, 138.
92	Baume, 164.
93	F. R. Smith, letter, n.d.
94	Alexander, 186.
95	Durnford, 177.
96	Aylwin, 1945 Folder, 2c.
97	Cliffe, "Japanese Concerto' Notes," n.p.
98	Jacobs, 104.
99	Cliffe, "Orchestras," 5.
100	Baume, 164.
101	Baume, 164.
102	Jacobs, 146.
103	Jacobs, 147.
104	Baume, 165.
105	Toosey, Report, 21.
106	Baume, 165.
107	Owtram, 175.
108	Carter, 188.
109	Baume, 166.
110	Jacobs, 140.
111	Carter, 188.
112	Durnford, 177-178.
113	N. Smith, 129.
114	Jacobs, 138.
115	Durnford, 176.
116	Durnford, 178-179.
117	Fisher, 101.
118	Durnford, 179-180.
119	Jacobs, 138-139.
120	Jacobs, 138-139.
121	Toosey, Report, 23.
122	Baume, 168.
123	Notes on costume renderings, trans. by Margie Bellamy.
124	Alexander, 186-187.
125	Durnford, 178.
126	Durnford, 178.
127	Aylwin, 1945 Folder, 2c.
128	Durnford, 181.
129	Jacobs, 149.
130	Baume, 170.

- 131 Coast, 226-228.
132 Coast, 229.

Chapter 10: “Strike a New Note!”

Kachu Mountain and Ubon

In early 1945, fit and light sick POWs from the hospital and relocation camps were redeployed to new locations in Thailand to construct airfields for the Japanese Air Force. These airfields would be used to defend the Japanese Army if a full retreat from Burma became necessary or in the event of any Allied invasions of Thailand and Malaya. The aerodrome camps at Kachu Mountain and Ubon are of particular interest because they contained a number of musicians and theatrical performers whose activities have been noted elsewhere. They offer a look at how these individuals continued the fight to keep fellow POWs' morale high at the start of their fourth year of captivity.

What is evident from the sources on Kachu Mountain, at least, is a war-weariness that weighed heavily on everyone, prisoners and captors alike. One of the Korean guards would tell the POWs, “Me No. 1 prisoner—prisoner all day, guard all night.”¹ This wasn't the only evidence of poor morale among the Japanese troops. Besides a general lack of discipline, the POWs noticed the guards looked shoddy, as they were wearing patched uniforms.

After months rehabilitating in rest camps, the renewed heavy work schedules and deficiencies in food, clothing, and medical supplies would take some POWs back to their earlier days on the railway—not an association that was good for morale. And building airfields whose “planes would be used against any Allied invasion and hinder our release,” Laurie Allison believed, “seemed to affect people more than the railway work.”²

New players in the military theatre of operation were the Free Thai guerillas. The fear that Allied military personnel had parachuted into Thailand under the cover of bombing raids to organize and lead a guerilla movement put the Japanese on high alert. Their recent losses to the advancing British forces in Burma might embolden the guerillas to take action. Attacks on the camps might free POWs to join those fighting forces.

Since the POWs at Kachu Mountain and Ubon did not have secret radios available, they were completely cut off from direct news about the ongoing status of the war, which only increased their sense of isolation and abandonment.

Kachu Mountain Aerodrome Camp

Kachu Mountain Aerodrome Camp was located some one hundred miles south of Bangkok at the beginning of the Kra Peninsula near a town called Phetchaburi; many of the POWs knew the camp by that name.¹ Douglas Harris remembered it was called Kachu Mountain Camp, “after a large mountain on the plains a few miles distant. On top of Kashu [*sic*] Mount itself was a tall white pagoda, evidently a landmark for our planes; often on moonlight nights we would hear them overhead and then hear them change direction as they reached the Pagoda.”³ Because of its role in guiding Allied bombers to their targets, Kachu Mountain with its white pagoda became a beacon of hope for the POWs.

¹ Also called by the POWs *Petburi*, *Phetburi*, or *Petchburi*.



FIGURE 10.1. AERIAL RECONNAISSANCE PHOTOGRAPH OF KACHU MOUNTAIN CAMP. COURTESY OF TOM BOARDMAN.

This aerial reconnaissance photograph of Kachu Mountain Camp was taken later in 1945 when the camp was fully operational. Visible in the distance is the mountain from which the camp got its name.

Situated on a plain in the midst of former rice paddies, Kachu Mountain was not a pleasant location. When Laurie Allison arrived from Chungkai in mid-February, he described it as “flat, hot and dusty.”⁴ John Sharp, arriving a few days later, wrote, “Camp is little more than a clearing with a row of huts for our men, and a few others—eleven hundred prisoners (500 British, 600 Australian).” One interesting feature of the camp Sharp noted was that it was not surrounded by a bamboo fence but by a *zareba* (thorn fence). The I. J. A. commandant, Lieutenant Ishito, was rumored to be “well-meaning” but ineffectual. The POW administration was headed by Lieutenant R. Davidson, an Australian.ⁱⁱ Their interpreter, Mitsushita, had been educated in the United States.ⁱⁱⁱ The other ranks’ workforce was composed of Australians from Tamarkan and British drafts and volunteers from Chungkai.

Since Kachu Mountain was meant to be a temporary work camp, it contained only limited facilities and amenities: “new latrines were not allowed to be dug, nor a barber’s shop built.”⁶ As it was not situated near a river, a well was dug in the camp, but the chronic shortage of water and inadequate number of latrines would eventually cause serious health problems.

Under Lieutenant Ishito, the Koreans guarding the camp had become so lax in their duties that the flogging of camp goods by POWs through the thorn fence to local Thais for extra food was endemic. Fearing the Japanese would take reprisals on their fruit and vegetable rations if this activity continued, the POW administration established its own internal police force to put a stop to it. By 11 March the camp had increased to 2,281 POWs with 831 of these in hospital.⁷ The POW administration was disturbed by the

ⁱⁱ He may have been in charge at Kachu Mountain before officers were ordered to Kanburi.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mitsushita, who still had a wife and family in the States, occasionally visited “the American quarters for a chat” [J. Sharp, *Diary*, 4 March 1945].

number of light sick being sent from Chungkai to work. Having just come from Chungkai himself, John Sharp understood why: “[The administration] Don’t realize that the opportunity was taken at Chungkai to get rid of them.”⁸

To construct the airfield, the POWs had to hand-drill and break stones from a nearby quarry to ballast the airstrip. Both sites were several miles away from the camp. Local Thais were employed on these sites as well, and their attitude toward the Japanese was noted by Sharp as “very impudent,” indicating that the Japanese had lost the good will of the Thai people at this point in the war—if they ever had it.⁹

Ubon Aerodrome Camp

Ubon Aerodrome Camp was located outside the town of Ubon Ratchatani, some 390 miles northeast of Bangkok. The first draft of other ranks and medical officers arrived in Ubon from Nong Pladuk on 26 February. By the middle of March the transfer of troops would be complete. Major Chida, who had been the I. J. A. commandant in Nong Pladuk, remained in charge at Ubon. Unlike at Kachu Mountain, the POW administration at Ubon was in the hands of two noncommissioned officers. Before leaving for Kanburi Officers’ Camp, Lieutenant-Colonel Philip Toosey had made an unusual decision about who should be in charge at Ubon: though several medical officers would remain with the other ranks when they were evacuated, Toosey turned over command of his British and Australian troops to his Regimental Sergeant Major A. McTavish and the N.E.I. troops to Warrant Officer 1 S. J. Slotboom.¹⁰

Since no previous camp existed at Ubon, the first order of business for the POWs was to build their living quarters, cookhouse, and canteen. But the Japanese insisted that they start work on the two airfields immediately; their own needs had to take second place. Until accommodation huts were built, they would camp out in the open paddy fields.¹¹ For William Wilder, the first months at Ubon were miserable:

No huts, Sleep in open. Just too bad if it’s wet. Some time before they [accommodation huts] will be ready. Work on an aerodrome about 7 or 8 miles away. March both ways. . . . A camp to build and an aerodrome. Doesn’t look as if the war will end soon. Cold at night, hot in the day. I haven’t enough clothes to keep warm. Shirt and shorts are in rags. I’m in a bad way.¹²

Shortly after the POWs’ arrival an Australian other ranks was caught trying to escape and subsequently executed. Before their time at Ubon was over, there would be another attempted escape, this time by an Englishman, who would suffer the same fate. Both events placed severe restrictions on the lives of the POWs who remained in Ubon.

Entertainment Efforts at Kachu Mountain

When Laurie Allison arrived at Kachu Mountain in February, he noticed a small platform stage near the entrance of the camp.¹³ John Sharp reported that a “Concert at night” took place on 28 February and another on 15 March, but these early concerts were no more than halfhearted affairs with single artists and emceed sing-alongs.¹⁴

After living in the Kachu Mountain camp for a little over two weeks, Sharp recorded some troubling observations about the physical and psychological effects of a drawn-out war on the POWs:

“a noticeable deterioration in discipline, conduct (urinating in public, etc.) and mental ability.”¹⁵ Allison believed the depressing atmosphere in the camp compounded these deficiencies. “Of all my POW camps,” he wrote, “Petburi was the most hopeless. . . . [It] lacked the attractions of other camps with very little in-hut discussions and there was a more morose attitude among its inhabitants.”¹⁶

Allison nearly died at Kachu Mountain. He was diagnosed by medical officer Hugh de Wardener with malaria and pneumonia, but there was no medicine to treat him. That he did not die was thanks to a mate, Peter Gwillim, whose visits with food and companionship strengthened his will to live. Placed on water-carrying detail to other sick patients as he recovered, Allison remembered, “the remainder of my stay was confused and pretty lifeless.”¹⁷

If the deterioration in discipline and mental ability and the morose attitude continued, many of the POWs would not have the will to carry on. Faced with the stress of another construction project, an erratic food supply, and scarce medical supplies after the respite of 1944, when many POWs had regained some semblance of normalcy, there had been a rapid regression to the mental condition of the terrible “Speedo” days on the railway. The few impromptu concerts on the makeshift stage were not proving adequate to combat the slide toward despair.

In a replay of arguments used by POW commandants during the railway construction, Lieutenant Davidson informed Ishito that if steps weren’t take soon to address the morale problem, there wouldn’t be enough workers left to complete the airfield. As in the past, one of the remedies proposed was to establish a concert party. And, as had happened in those railway camps, its approval produced an immediate positive effect on the POWs. “Word of mouth enquiries soon sparked off interest,” Tom Boardman recalled, “and with the prospect of ‘camp duties’ sufficient talent was soon recruited by interviews or past records.”¹⁸

“The White Pagoda Players”

On 21 March, formation of “The White Pagoda Players” was announced. The group was composed of performers, designers, and technicians who had previously been involved with concert parties at Tamarkan and Chungkai, along with an assortment of new faces.

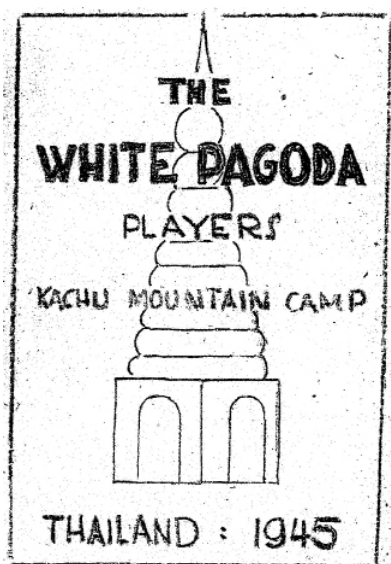


FIGURE 10.2. PROSPECTUS FOR “THE WHITE PAGODA PLAYERS.” COURTESY OF JOHN SHARP.

An elaborate prospectus for the new concert party detailed the membership: Lieutenant Nelson was officer in charge with a production staff of four.^{iv} Musical direction was under the leadership of Tony Gerrish, the dance band leader from Tamarkan, whose ensemble included the U.S. Navy musician G. L. Galyean. Four musical groups were proposed: a “Theatre Orchestra” of seven players; a “Tzicane [Hungarian Gypsy] Orchestra” of eight mandolins and ukuleles; a quartet who called themselves “The Lost Chords”; and a ten-member male chorus conducted by Stan Arlett.

Five producers were announced, among whom were Keith Neighbour and Leo Britt.^v “Maestro” Britt had volunteered for deployment to Kachu Mountain when censorship restrictions at Chungkai forbidding any words spoken from the stage became intolerable. No such restrictions were in effect at Kachu Mountain. Although Medical Officer Dudley Gotla was also in the camp, he did not become one of the producers, though he did perform in shows.

Twenty men were listed as “Players.” Among the British performers from Chungkai were Sandy Munnoch, Hugh de Wardener, Keith Neighbour, and Tom Boardman. From Tamarkan came the Australians Jim F. Anderson, Johnnie Branchflower, R. F. Clare, A. J. Copson, and Val Middleton.¹⁹

Tom Boardman came into his own as a performer at Kachu Mountain. He played in all the musical groups, sang in “The Lost Chords,” and was a bit player in sketches. While at Kachu Mountain, he would give his smaller camp-made ukulele—the one he had played up country to entertain the troops—to Leo Britt and play instead the larger one he had constructed at Chungkai just before leaving.²⁰

All in all, the White Pagoda Players prospectus lists a total of fifty-odd men, a formidable group of entertainers for such a small camp. With five producers and a production staff responsible for costumes, scenery, props, makeup, etc., the players were imagining themselves as a full-blown Chungkai- or Tamarkan-style concert party, with high expectations for what they would be able to achieve.

A New Theatre

One of the first items of business for the new concert party was to construct a proscenium theatre to replace the platform stage. Like the first theatre at Tamarkan, it would be a shed-like structure with a flat roof instead of a pitched one.²¹ When finished it was dubbed “The White Pagoda Theatre.” Shows could only take place in the afternoon or early evening, as lights would attract Allied aircraft. Since the POWs were allowed only one yasume every ten days, the first concert was announced for 1 April.²²

By 29 March, the work on the airfield was nearly finished, but a rumor was circulating that the POWs would next be put to work building a second one nearby.²³

Entertainment Delayed at Ubon

The beginning of April found the POW camp at Ubon still unfinished, and Charles Steel wrote in his diary, “Restrictions are now very tight. Plenty of nit-picking, the worst being the order to crop our hair. You wouldn’t recognize me, I’m sure.”^{vi} Men are very badly off for clothes now—many almost naked.”²⁴

^{iv} T. P. Crankshaw, wardrobe; Keith Neighbour, décor; H. B. Reay, makeup; L. V. C. Luff, props and scenery; and J. H. Pi?? [unreadable], stage manager.

^v Other names are unreadable.

^{vi} Steel composed his diary entries as letters to his wife.



FIGURE 10.3. NORMAN PRITCHARD. SKETCH BY JAN VAN HOLTHE.
COURTESY OF NORMAN PRITCHARD.

This sketch of Norman Pritchard by Jan van Holthe shows the close-cropped hair required in Ubon.

Unlike Kachu Mountain, Major Chida had not yet given permission for the large contingent of British and Dutch/Indonesian entertainers from Nong Pladuk to reorganize. Waiting eagerly in the wings were the Harboured Lights veterans “Ace” Connolly and his “Kings of Swing” (including the extraordinary song and musical comedy writer-producer Bob Gale); “Wizardus” (magician Fergus Anckorn); the comedians Hank and Frank, as well as the Dutch comic De Zwart; the brilliant solo violinist Nico Brunz; and the female impersonators Basil Ferron and “Skippy”—plus a host of other British and Dutch/Indonesian performers. And, of course, the amazing technical staff led by Jock Cameron and the publicity and set design team of Norman Pritchard and Jan van Holthe. When concert party activities were allowed to resume, the troupe members’ prior working relationship would prove of enormous benefit in generating new and exciting shows. In the meantime, everyone was engaged full time in either building the camp or working on the aerodromes.

The White Pagoda Players in Production

The first show by the White Pagoda Players at Kachu Mountain opened on 1 April. Nothing is known about it—its title was not recorded by John Sharp in his diary, although he continued to write detailed entries that offer an insider’s view of daily life in the camp.²⁵ As Leo Britt was the group’s most experienced producer, it’s very likely this was his first production in the camp.

Back in Chungkai, Britt had been in final rehearsals with Sutton Vane’s *Outward Bound* when the theatre was suddenly closed and all the officers sent off to Kanburi. Without the officers, who were the mainstay of his cast, any chance of his production going ahead became impossible. But he was not going to be foiled in producing a show he had become passionate about. He would leave Chungkai and remount

the show at Kachu Mountain with the group of British and Australian actors who were leaving with him. To that end it's possible he took all the scripts, costumes, and even the painted backdrop for the aborted Chungkai production with him.

The cast for his new production came from a pool of excellent performers that included British medical officers Dudley Gotla, Hugh de Wardener, and Leslie Stock and British RSM Sandy Munnoch, and Australians Keith Neighbour, Pat Fox,^{vii} and bandmaster Tony Gerrish.

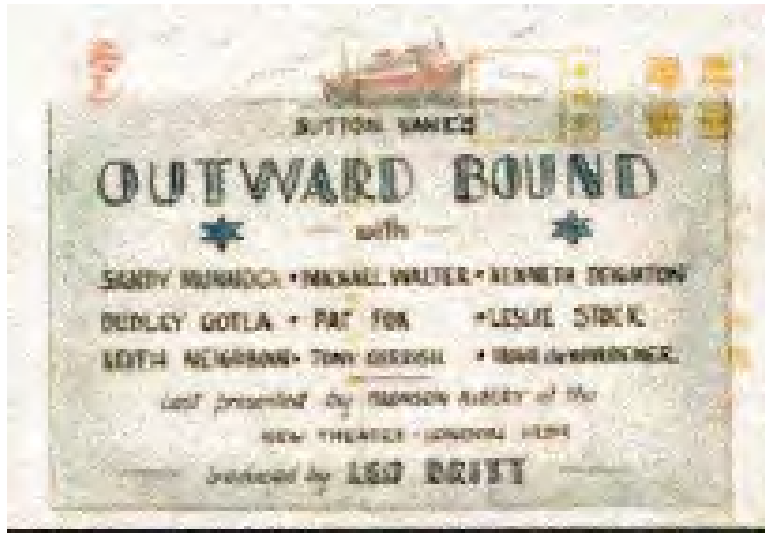


FIGURE 10.4. SMALL POSTER FOR *OUTWARD BOUND*. KEITH NEIGHBOUR. COURTESY OF GUDRUN TAMANDL.

This small poster for *Outward Bound* was painted by Keith Neighbour to advertise the show. There are posters for three other shows performed at Kachu Mountain also painted by Keith Neighbour, but since there are no dates on any of them, and Sharp didn't always record show titles in his diary, they will simply be listed here. They are: *They Come And They Go* and *The Citadel* (both produced by Keith Neighbour) and an unreadable title for a show that featured the Tzicane Orchestra.^{viii}

The War: Abroad and at Home

The rumor about an additional airfield construction project proved accurate. On 20 April, a high-ranking officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Fukujima, arrived to take over the camp, which indicates that the runways under construction at Kachu Mountain mission had increased in strategic importance as the Japanese army's losses in Burma increased. Sharp, Boardman, and others were sent to the new site to begin work.^{ix} Here, as on other occasions, the local Thais secretly tried to keep the POWs informed of the conduct of the war. A Thai official visiting the new site one day wrote the latest war news about Germany, Burma, and the Philippines in the dirt with a stick. They also heard "that Tamarkan had been bombed again; also Wampo viaduct and shelf were demolished and lying in the river."²⁶

Back "home," life at Kachu Mountain itself was becoming hazardous. When a new I. J. A. headquarters was built a short distance from Kachu Mountain camp, the Free Thai guerillas found a way

^{vii} Since his name does not appear in the *White Pagoda Players* prospectus, the Australian singer Pat Fox must have arrived in Kachu Mountain shortly after the formation of that company.

^{viii} This information has been taken from a photograph of a collage of posters supplied by Keith Neighbour's wife, Gudrun Tamandl.

^{ix} Boardman's inclusion on this draft may suggest that not all the *White Pagoda Players* were placed on light camp duties after all.

to put the Japanese on notice that they were in the area and could take action whenever they wished. On 12 April “two Japanese guards were reported murdered on old ’drome and one missing,” noted Sharp. In retaliation, nine Thais were arrested and interrogated with the use of water torture.²⁷

If a concert party was given on 10 April, there is no record of it. Sharp did note, though, the news that the POWs would be given a half-yasume every fifteen days in addition to their full yasume every ten days—another opportunity for concerts. But this new ruling would not go into effect until June.²⁸

“Strike a New Note”

Lieutenant Ishito’s lack of discipline in running Kachu Mountain had not gone unnoticed at I. J. A. headquarters. On 20 April, a high-ranking officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Fukujima, arrived to take over the camp, which indicates that the runways under construction at Kachu Mountain had increased in strategic importance as the Japanese army’s losses in Burma increased. Rumor had it that Fukujima, in contrast to Ishito, was “a stern disciplinarian.”²⁹ Fukujima intended to “strike a new note” by restoring military discipline and whipping his POW workforce into shape.



FIGURE 10.5. PROGRAM COVER FOR *THE DREAMER*. KEITH NEIGHBOUR. COURTESY OF GUDRUN TAMANDL.

The White Pagoda Players’ show scheduled for that evening was cancelled due to heavy rain—evidence that another monsoon season was fast approaching. It was to have been an original one-act play, *The Dreamer*, written by Keith Neighbour, starring himself and Hugh de Wardener. For some reason it appears never to have been produced: no one among the FEPOWs at Kachu Mountain, including de Wardener, remembered anything about it, and the extant program does not contain a playbill.

One of Colonel Fukujima’s first acts as commandant was to rescind Ishito’s order allowing the British reveille bugle call.³⁰ Two days later, during a camp inspection, he visited the POW cemetery, which he found in a disgusting state and for which he immediately donated five dollars for flowers to rectify the situation.³¹

With Fukujima now in charge, the POW medical officers made a pitch for changes to the food situation, warning “that if the diet doesn’t improve, serious illness though lack of vitamins will result.” Fukujima agreed with their assessment and promised to do what he could about it.³² Thinking he was in the giving mood, the POW administration tried once again to secure approval for lectures in the huts, but this request was denied. On 23 April, the monsoon rains arrived in full force and flooded part of the camp.³³ In

spite of the rain—and revealing his military mindset—Fukujima ordered air-raid trenches dug.

The emperor's birthday was celebrated on 29 April, and the POWs at Kachu Mountain were all given special *presentos* in honor of this event: “2 eggs, 2 packets Red Cross tobacco (our own!) And an extra bullock, making three.” The day's festivities included a cricket match and a demonstration of the Japanese martial art *kendo*, understood as “bayonet fighting” by Sharp. As usual, the concert party was required to present a show. Its title, *Mountain Music*, was meant to focus the POWs' attention, not on the emperor, but on Kachu Mountain with its white pagoda—and all that it signified about the defeat of the Japanese and the end of their captivity.”³⁴

At the beginning of May, Fukujima ordered a high bamboo fence constructed around the camp with an earthen bund and moat inside it.³⁵ Suspicious that the POWs were disobeying his orders regarding activities permitted in their living quarters, he sent the Japanese interpreter, Mitsushita, “around the huts before lights out presumably to detect any singing or lectures which are forbidden.”³⁶

On 9 May, ballasting began on the new aerodrome runway, what Sharp called a “tedious job—task of 25 square yards to one hundred men,” so the concert the next evening was a welcome relief. It was a new Leo Britt production called *Strike A New Note*.³⁷



FIGURE 10.6. HAND-DRAWN AND COLORED POSTER FOR *STRIKE A NEW NOTE*. COURTESY OF JOHN SHARP.

A roughly drawn, hand-colored poster on scrap paper advertised the show and its highlights as Leo Britt's “Third Little Show.” With its title, Britt alerted his audience that he had heard their complaints and made a concerted effort to “strike a new note” with the show's content. Given their workload and present physical and psychological condition, the POWs wanted entertainment that would be fast-paced and laugh-filled, rather than another wordy drama that demanded too much concentration. Kachu Mountain was a work camp, not a hospital convalescent camp.

Britt's “new note” was a variety show that brought immediate pleasure with a sparkling array

of turns. The music was presented by the popular singer Pat Fox^x as well as Tony Gerrish's "Swingette," with vocals by Jim Anderson. This time Hugh de Wardener would deliver a comedic monologue, and Branchflower, Copson, and Ballanger ("And Full Supporting Cast"), a short one-act play. Other performers gave a radio show version of *Mutiny on the Bounty*, Kachu Mountain's own "Crazy Gang" appeared in a wild farce with uproarious topical references, and Segal and Nelson delivered a sketch based on the American singer Sophie Tucker's old standby number, "My Yiddisha Momma!!"^{xi}

At the moment, the grand scheme for a Chungkai- or Tamarkan-style theatre—with elaborate sets and costumes—was not working out. Resources like bamboo and atap to make scenery and props and fabric to make costumes had proven impossible to come by. All Laurie Allison, who was "billeted in the last hut directly in front of the stage,"³⁸ could remember about the theatre in his "confused" state was that the theatre was "always empty with a drooping atap roof."³⁹ Given this situation, Britt felt it was important to point out that *Strike A New Note* was a "little" show, because he still had plans to produce "big" shows.

Entertainment Starts at Ubon

Meanwhile, at Ubon the airfield and camp construction had progressed to a point where Major Chida allowed the entertainers to start producing shows for the benefit of the camp. Their first was an *Impromptu Show* on 12 May, followed by another a week later.^{xii} "Everything was in flux at the time," recalled Fergus Anckorn, "we hadn't even got a stage at one stage. So they said, 'Well, let's put on a show tonight of some sort.' And they would make something up and we would all do a bit."⁴⁰

In one of these early shows, a magic act by "Wizardus" produced some childish delight: "At Ubon I borrowed a hat and after showing it empty produced from it 3 live kittens."⁴¹ In another, one of the comedians got them in serious trouble:

Now in some camps we weren't allowed to laugh, ever. If you laughed, they suspected you were laughing at them, and you could end up being beaten. So, no laughter. And we would get comedians on the stage, trying to make us laugh, and we're busting a gut not to laugh. It was hilarious.

And I remember on one occasion, this bloke was marching up and down . . . he had a little cane [swagger stick] under his arm . . . he was pretending to be an officer. And the Japs thought that he was making . . . knocking the mickey out of them (they used to carry canes). So they went up on stage and beat him up. And then we laughed.⁴²

In retaliation for this infraction of the no-laughing rule, shows were banned for several weeks.⁴³

During the hiatus, Dental Officer "Toothy" Martin, who had participated in shows at Nong Pladuk, sought permission for the POWs to build a theatre. Once approved, the entertainers went right to work and discovered they had plenty of volunteers who "were pleased to help as it gave them something to do."⁴⁴ This project would keep them busy until the ban was lifted.

^x It is interesting to note that Pat Fox's name does not appear on the White Pagoda Players prospectus

^{xi} The subject of this skit suggests that Segal and Nelson may have been Americans.

^{xii} Besides the interviews with Fergus Anckorn and Norman Pritchard and the scenic designs of Jan van Holthe and Pritchard, the only knowledge we have of what shows were produced at Ubon comes from a hand-printed list in one of the souvenir programs for the shows at Nong Pladuk now thought to have been kept by the performer Fred Knightley [IWM Misc 116 Item 1834].

Mixed Blessings at Kachu Mountain

Back at Kachu Mountain, Colonel Fukujima's insistence on the strictest discipline was proving a mixed blessing. On the negative side was the fact that his administrative staff, frequent recipients of his harsh treatment, took out their frustrations on those lower down the chain of command, and those men, in turn, on whoever was beneath them. The last links in the chain were, of course, the POWs. John Sharp detailed the outcomes:

13.5 Incident on bund—eight men beaten savagely with spade because at break they didn't lay down tools in prescribed fashion.

14.5 Tightening up of discipline—no smoking on parade, no eating during rest-breaks—no carrying home pig-weed, firewood, etc. into the camp. We must march in 4's smartly, saluting CO's seat in Japanese office and also his house when passing. M.O's recently surprised at 3 a.m. by search party.⁴⁵

As a consequence, some of the POWs reverted to ever more desperate measures to survive, as they had during railway construction days: "Scarcity of men with any integrity now—most are in some racket (cookhouse, canteen, etc)," noted Sharp.⁴⁶

On the positive side, Fukujima's resolve to shape up the camp was making life in Kachu Mountain much more agreeable.

20.5. The colonel has given orders for (1) roofing the latrine (2) building a barbers shop and a canteen (3) raising and roofing paths from one hut to another. He has bought a Thai pony and employs an Australian groom with permission to ride it. Yasumi [sic] today from 1 o'clock—slat bashing, anti-cholera inoculations, and search (on the square—and me with my diary tied round my belly). This was the worst *quart d'heure* I have ever spent (I think)—the guards came round patting us to see if we had anything concealed on us !!!!⁴⁷

Luckily, Sharp's diary escaped detection. The compulsion of men like Sharp to take this risk so that an account of their horrific life during those lost years would be preserved was truly brave—and, perhaps, foolhardy—but we would be much the poorer without these records of endurance.

On 20 May, a scheduled half-yasume day, the afternoon show was *Sunny Side Up*.

"I Also Am a Prisoner"

Like Major Chida at Ubon, Lieutenant-Colonel Fukujima's behavior in Kachu Mountain revealed him to be more interesting and complex person than original thought. As a Japanese officer, he was intent on running his camp along strict military lines and on treating the POWs under his command according to the guidelines laid out in the Geneva Convention. At the same time that he instituted an exacting code of

discipline, he also distributed Red Cross clothing and food, including chickens from the Japanese kitchens, to the POWs. (This is the basis for Jim Whittaker's memory that Kachu Mountain was a good camp: "the food was better than in many of the Burma camps and we were able to purchase duck eggs, bananas and some other locally available produce."⁴⁸)

But an interesting entry in John Sharp's diary reveals the private face behind Fukujima's public face. "Colonel has a mound covered with turf outside his house," Sharp observed, "said to be a replica of Fujiyama: new house building—made of bambu [*sic*], lath, mud and straw, and a new mountain in front of the east window."⁴⁹ What Sharp unknowingly describes is the construction of a traditional Japanese teahouse and landscape—a retreat for contemplation and meditation.

Nevertheless, Fukujima's staff was chafing under his harsh regimen. On 23 May, Sharp heard the interpreter Mitsushita complain, "You are prisoners: I also am a prisoner. I'm fed up."⁵⁰ But if life was difficult for the Japanese staff, for the despised Koreans forced into the Japanese military as guards and cooks it could only have been worse.

As the end of the month approached with both the new airfield and fence-embankment-moat running behind schedule, Fukujima declared a "Speedo" to complete the projects. Once again this order revived memories of the worst days of the railway construction as convalescing POWs were turned out for work over medical officers' protests and men older than fifty were no longer exempt from heavy labor.⁵¹ Fukujima may have been trying to treat his POWs humanely, but with an I. J. A. headquarters nearby, he also made sure he obeyed his orders.

Runaway Love

As promised, the beginning of June started with a half-holiday, and Leo Britt had a brand-new show—a musical comedy entitled *Runaway Love*—ready to open. This was the "big" show Britt had been promising his audience. It was a revival of a hit show he and Leofric Thorpe had produced back in Changi, Singapore, under the title *Hellsabuzzin'!*, with a large cast and numerous costumes and settings. With its "fast music, fast dancing, and fast women," it had been a huge success. At Kachu Mountain Britt must have put enormous energy into getting the concert party's small support staff and technical crew to assemble sets and costumes and rehearse a large cast.

The Complication

But in the afternoon of opening night, *Runaway Love* had to be cancelled because the interpreter and censor Mitsushita wasn't available to review the text for approval before it could be performed, as was standard procedure. He had left camp temporarily to seek medical advice.⁵² The show's sudden cancellation must have been extremely disappointing to Britt and his company—and his audience. Any performance would have to wait until the interpreter returned.

As a substitute, the POWs had a soccer match during their free time after dinner—that is, until their loud cheering brought the game to Fukujima's attention and it was stopped because it had run over half an hour beyond the 6 p.m. deadline for such activities.⁵³

Meanwhile, further flooding of the camp by monsoon rains, combined with the inadequate number of latrines and water drawn from a single well, created highly unsanitary conditions. On 11 June, Sharp was admitted to the dysentery ward when mucous and blood had appeared in his stools. Even there he continued making entries in his diary, including the startling news that a lorry had been found abandoned outside the camp, three Koreans guards were missing, "the Japanese sergeant had been murdered, and

... one of the Koreans was [the] interpreter during the recent torture of the Thais.”⁵⁴ The guerillas were retaliating for the mistreatment of the Thai laborers.

Kachu Mountain was by all accounts a troubled camp—and not just because of Fukujima’s policies or the Japanese staff’s and Korean guards’ unhappiness with their commandant. From the beginning, the POWs had been dissatisfied with the actions—or inactions—of the Australian POW commandant and his staff, and Sharp’s diary includes numerous references to others’ statements about the need for new leadership. Two days after his release from hospital, Sharp was “standing easy”^{xiii} during evening *tenko* when an attempt was made to suppress illegal activities taking place in the ranks:

19.6 This evening, the W.O’s on parade read out KR’s [King’s Regulations] on the subject of mutiny, sedition, and attending political meetings. The first is aimed against the Australians, who are disgusted with the weak conduct of the [POW] camp administration, and are said to have formed a “shadow cabinet” to replace it: and the third against British communist circle “Red Square.”⁵⁵

The following evening saw the concert party’s revue *Jungle Jinks*, which, like the titles of previous shows at Kachu Mountain, had an odd correspondence with recent events.

Sharp’s bout with dysentery was only the first indication of its rapid spread throughout the camp. The well water had become contaminated, and orders were given to boil all water for drinking.⁵⁶

The [Anti-]Climax

Further disruption to camp life was caused by an announcement that there would soon be several evacuations of POWs to other locations. The heavy sick were to be sent back to the hospital at Nakhon Pathom, where they could receive better care, and 1,000 “part fit, part light sick” volunteers would be sent to join POWs already working at Nakhon Nai in northeastern Thailand.⁵⁷ At this point, lots of volunteers wanted out of Kachu Mountain.

On 27 June, Sharp reported that Colonel Fukujima had become seriously ill with dysentery: “benjo speedo forty times per day—Our M.O’s wish to give him emetine, but the Japanese won’t allow him—he was sent, yesterday to Bangkok—‘To paradise’ say the guards hopefully.”⁵⁸

The first party of volunteers left for Nakhon Nai on 30 June. This group included British and Australians and all the Americans in camp. POWs assigned to camp duties, which included those in the concert party, had not been permitted to volunteer. With interpreter Mitsushita finally back after a four-week hiatus, Leo Britt’s postponed production of *Runaway Love* was about to open (one can almost see Britt behind the scenes pulling the strings, desperately trying to keep his cast intact).⁵⁹ But the god of theatre did not smile on Britt’s “big” show. It went on, but it was performed in the drizzling rain, which didn’t make for the best audience response. The second performance, scheduled for the following evening, held out the promise of being the singular triumph Britt knew it could be.

^{xiii} The British command for “Parade Rest.”

The Ubon Theatre

Since the POWs at Ubon could only work on building their theatre during leisure time in the evening, it had taken them four and a half weeks to finish it. Norman Pritchard described the process: “as it was on the flat parade ground, tons and tons of earth were moved by hand (no vehicles!) to make a platform. The Theatre was designed by a P.O.W. Architect. . . . The platform was, I think, about 35 feet square, 3 feet high at the front and about 4 feet high at the back! The building was usual Far East construction—bamboo, matting and atap.”⁶⁰

During his interview, Pritchard elaborated on how the men had moved the earth by hand to form the platform:

We carried the earth umpteen dozens of times. You know how it was carried? In a stretcher . . . two-person carried. Yeah. And that's how they built the railway. All the earth and sand was transported on stretchers. . . . And it was roughly about 20 feet across and 30 feet deep.^{xiv} There's plenty of room for maneuvering round behind.⁶¹



FIGURE 10.7. PHOTOGRAPH OF UBON THEATRE. COURTESY OF NORMAN PRITCHARD.

A photograph of the POW theatre at Ubon taken immediately after the Japanese capitulation shows a large theatre with a pitched roof. There is no orchestra pit. The proscenium arch is wide and deep, forming an inner frame that contains two entrances allowing access to and from the stage. The pitched

^{xiv} These figures do not exactly square with his earlier estimations. Memory is faulty.

roof's height suggests a grid that could be used for hanging scenery was in place. Bamboo and atap wings project out from the proscenium on either side, concealing the offstage areas behind them. A traveler curtain, made from rice sacks stitched together, hangs from the upstage side of the proscenium. The white box suspended from the center of the proscenium arch tells us that the concert party at Ubon, unlike at Kachu Mountain, was allowed to use stage lighting. A ground row hiding slush-lamp footlights is also visible at the front of the stage.

The photograph also shows a unique structural feature of this theatre that Fergus Anckorn remembered well:

*We built the proscenium up against a tree . . . big old tree, like an oak—couldn't have been an oak—but it was that type of tree. And you could get from inside the proscenium into this tree where illicit things were hidden. And where we had decided, when we were all going to get killed, to get in there. We could have gotten about six of us in there.*⁶²

Pritchard explained how the earthen stage allowed settings to be changed easily: "The thing with that one was that they were earth. Raised earth . . . so that all you had to do with creating a set was just to pull up the post and dig another hole so you can post it in another place" (see more information about the unique architectural and staging features of the Ubon theatre in Chapter 12: "Jolly Good Show!").⁶³

"The Ubon Concert Party"

The ban on performances had another positive effect, giving the entertainers time to form "The Ubon Concert Party" and to plan the series of shows that would appear in their new theatre. These would not be simple impromptu variety shows but plays, revues, band shows, and musical comedies with all the sets, costumes, and staging surprises their former Nong Pladuk audiences had come to expect.

Unlike Kachu Mountain, Ubon was in an area surrounded by lush vegetation, so bamboo for flats and props was readily available. Slush lamps were easily made out of found objects, and kerosene pressure lamps or hurricane lamps could be borrowed from the Japanese. And it's entirely possible that when the large numbers of Harboured Lights entertainers evacuated Nong Pladuk, they carried as many of their curtains, costumes, and other theatrical paraphernalia with them as they could. Since it was a full camp evacuation, the Japanese may even have transported these goods as necessities to the new locale. At Kachu Mountain, where the entertainers had arrived from different camps, a like scenario had not played out: with the dissolution of Tamarkan, the costumes and props had gone to the officers' camp at Kanburi; at Chungkai, concert parties remained active.

Hollywood Revue

The show that opened the new Ubon theatre on 20 June was *Hollywood Revue*, which, according to Pritchard, was “simply a vehicle for getting people to come in and impersonate film stars.”⁶⁴

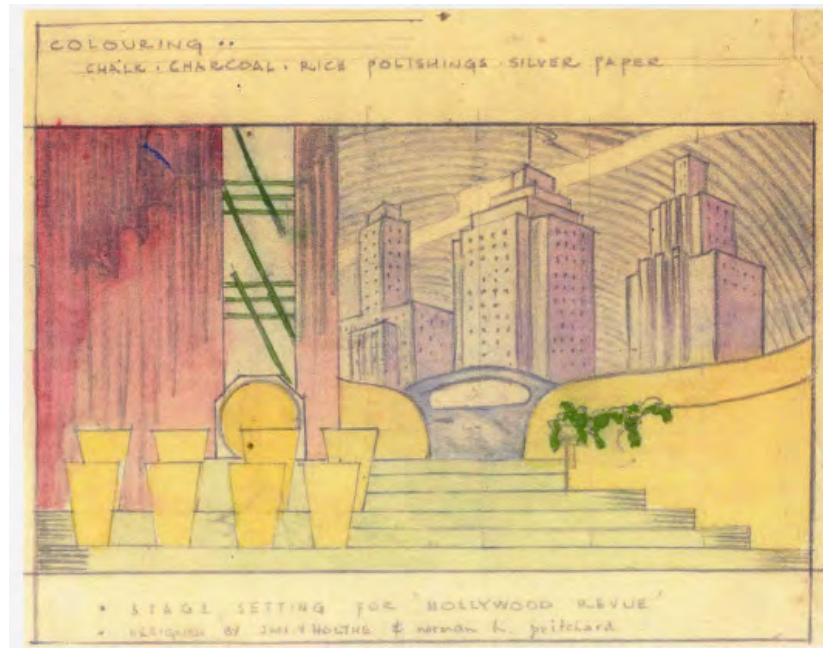


FIGURE 10.8. SET RENDERING FOR *HOLLYWOOD REVUE*. JAN VAN HOLTHE AND NORMAN PRITCHARD. COURTESY OF NORMAN PRITCHARD.

With *Hollywood Revue*, Jan van Holthe and Norman Pritchard resumed their role as set designers that had started back in Nong Pladuk (see more about their set designs for the shows at Ubon in Chapter 12: “Jolly Good Show!”). Upstage center, framed by the entrance between two half-walls, is the profile of a limousine, its door directly opposite the opening between the walls. “So this bamboo matting became a car,” Pritchard explained. “The car came in and the door opened, and out steps Mae West (or someone) and did a performance.^{xv} And somebody would open the door [the artiste would get back in the car] and close it again, and the car would be gone.” Then the car would reappear, bringing in the next “star.”⁶⁵ Jock Cameron and his tech crew had created the limousine and figured out how to “drive” it on and off stage.

Following the inaugural performance, dentist “Toothy” Martin went onstage and thanked the performers for a great show; in return, he received a round of applause for his efforts in getting a theatre approved.⁶⁶

^{xv} The Dutch female impersonator “Skippy” would have been perfect as Mae West.

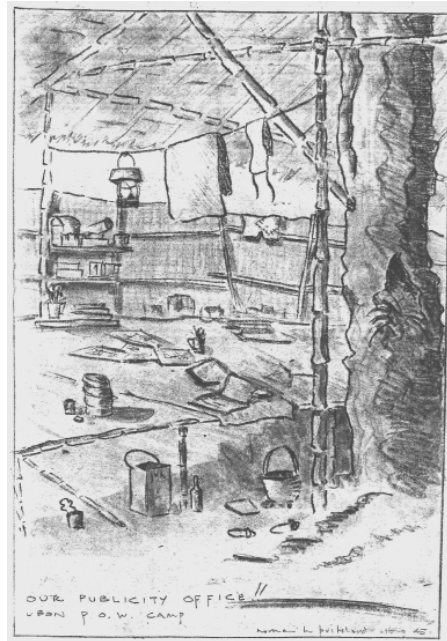


FIGURE 10.9. "OUR PUBLICITY OFFICE." SKETCH BY NORMAN PRITCHARD. COURTESY OF NORMAN PRITCHARD.

A sketch by Norman Pritchard shows his and van Holthe's "publicity office" at Ubon. Bamboo supports hold up an atap roof, and partial walls of matting enclose the space. It was built around a tree for stability. Art materials are scattered around the floor along with paper and paintbrushes. A hurricane-type lamp hangs overhead, suspended on the same line as a "jap happy" loincloth. In the background are shelves holding other supplies. Since no Pritchard and van Holthe souvenir programs for the shows at Ubon have come to light, it's possible they decided to concentrate their artistic efforts and scarce supply of paint and paper solely on set designs instead. Without programs, we have very little knowledge of the content or the performers in the Ubon shows.

Only a week after *Hollywood Revue*, the concert party continued the varied programming that had become its trademark with a remount of the mystery-thriller *Crime Does Not Pay*, performed at Nong Pladuk in July 1944. Entertainment at Ubon was up and running.

Runaway Love: The Denouement

More volunteers left Kachu Mountain for Nakhon Nai on 1 July, one of whom was Dudley Gotla. And then, once again—this time for unexplained reasons—the Japanese refused to allow Leo Britt to present the final performance of *Runaway Love*. (In response, he must have thrown one of his famous tantrums.) Inexplicably, the next night the Korean guards noisily celebrated a yasume with Thai whiskey. On 3 July, the reason for all this inexplicable behavior was made clear: Colonel Fukujima had died of dysentery in Bangkok. This news accounted both for the show's cancellation and the Korean guards' party.^{xvi67}

The last draft of volunteers left Kachu Mountain for Nakhon Nai six days later. This time the group included members of the White Pagoda Players: Hugh de Wardener, Pat Fox—and Leo Britt. Frustrated

^{xvi} With dysentery samples easily obtained, this has all the hallmarks of a "fragging" incident.

A hand-colored ground plan of “Kachu Airdrome Camp” [sic] shows the bamboo fence, bund, and moat surrounding the camp. A smaller schematic drawing in the corner illustrates the relative heights and relationships among these three elements.⁷⁰

The “excavation of a large pit” noted by Sharp wasn’t for bomb storage. Secret orders had been delivered to all units in the Far East from Imperial General Command in Tokyo that in the event of an attack by Allied forces, all POWs were to be executed. Confirmation of this secret order, which itself reveals the level of unrest in the camp, comes from a comment made by a disgruntled Korean guard that Sharp happened to overhear: “If anything happens, they [the Koreans] won’t know whether to shoot the prisoners or the Japanese.” Aware of the growing hostility toward them among the Korean troops, the Japanese allowed the guards only one round of ammunition when they left the camp.⁷¹

In spite of the loss of some key personnel and the increasingly tense situation, the White Pagoda Players did continue to produce entertainment: the latest, a Tony Gerrish band show entitled *Kashu Rhythm*, on 10 July.⁷²

Two days later, three POWs escaped from the airfield work detail, causing a panic: a Japanese officer threatened to shoot the *honcho* and sergeants in charge if the men weren’t found.⁷³ A thorough search was initiated and continued for several days, but the escapees had vanished. What the Japanese feared was that the escapees had made contact with Free Thai guerillas and would provide strategic information about the internal operation of the camp. By the middle of the month, the bund-cum-moat and bamboo fence were finished and the “Speedo” came to an end. On 17 July, the guerillas struck again: an “explosion and fire at the Japanese h.q. nearby—said to have been caused by Thais, who also cut a guard’s throat.”⁷⁴

And The Villain Still Pursued Her

On 20 July, the POWs received a full-day yasume which concluded with the concert party’s production of a totally new kind of entertainment: an old-fashioned melodrama, *And The Villain Still Pursued Her*. Once again, the show’s title has a strange coincidence with recent events offstage.⁷⁵ If the audience was encouraged to hiss the villain and cheer the hero—or in this case, the heroine—as a veiled reference to the recent escapes, it would have been a smash hit. A week later, when the new Japanese commandant permitted new activities to take place, quizzes and similar competitions were initiated to help fill the evening hours.⁷⁶

On 28 July, an Allied bombing raid hit an I. J. A. garrison in the nearby town of Phetchaburi, causing significant loss of life. Because Japanese soldiers had been killed in the raid, the POWs in Kachu Mountain were restricted to their huts and not permitted to sing, play cards, or have their half-yasume concert. They were warned once again that if anyone tried to escape either from work details or the camp, he would be shot. The new Japanese commandant attempted to have the POWs sign a “no-escape form,” but after much argument among staff and resistance from the rank and file, POW commandant Lieutenant Davidson told the Japanese that he would only recommend his men sign it, not order them to do so.⁷⁷ The Japanese did not press the matter further.

Ubon Gets Bright & Breezy

Once they had gotten their theatre built and their first two shows up, the entertainers at Ubon began to hit their stride. *Crime Doesn’t Pay* was followed on 4 July by *On The Spot*, an “Ace” Connolly and his “Kings of Swing” band show. As in Nong Pladuk, Major Chida continued to be a strong supporter of the POWs’ leisure time activities, especially their music. But his support came with a catch:

There we had a first-rate orchestra and had concerts once a week but a condition of our being allowed to have them was a quarter of an hour should be devoted to Japanese tunes. Chida played the flute [shakuhachi] and he usually sent for the leader of the orchestra—"Ace" Connolly—a few hours before the concert was due to begin and played to him the tunes he wanted the orchestra to play. And "Ace" had to memorise the tunes, transcribe them, rehearse the orchestra in them and "put them over" in the evening.

We had to admit that some of the tunes were catchy ones.⁷⁸

A week later, the first Dutch/Indonesian production took place at Ubon.

Allied victories in the war in the Pacific made life in Ubon more difficult, with restrictions tightening up day by day. But there was also beginning to be an air of expectancy that something significant was about to happen.⁷⁹ Late in July, Charles Steel noted, "working parties are bringing in very insistent rumours that the war is over."⁸⁰ Even more indicative that something was up was the fact that the prisoners were "digging holes across the new runways they had just made" so the paths could not be used by any aircraft.⁸¹ Still, there was no announcement of any change in status of the war indicated by Major Chida.

The British performers returned to the stage on 21 July with their latest revue, *Bright & Breezy*. Van Holthe and Pritchard again did the set design with a nautical motif.



FIGURE 10.11. SET DESIGN FOR *BRIGHT & BREEZY*. JAN VAN HOLTHE AND NORMAN PRITCHARD. COURTESY OF NORMAN PRITCHARD.

The backdrop, with its pier projecting out over the water and the pavilion at the end, resembled seaside resorts back in England. *Bright & Breezy* was followed a week later by another N.E.I. show.

Hot Ice

Due to the continual heavy rains falling on Kachu Mountain Camp, the show scheduled for 1 August was cancelled. On 4 August at Ubon, the British concert party returned to the stage with Bob Gale's latest musical comedy, *Hot Ice*. Although we know nothing about the musical except that it took place in the Swiss Alps, its title suggests the plot involved a jewel theft—a “caper.”

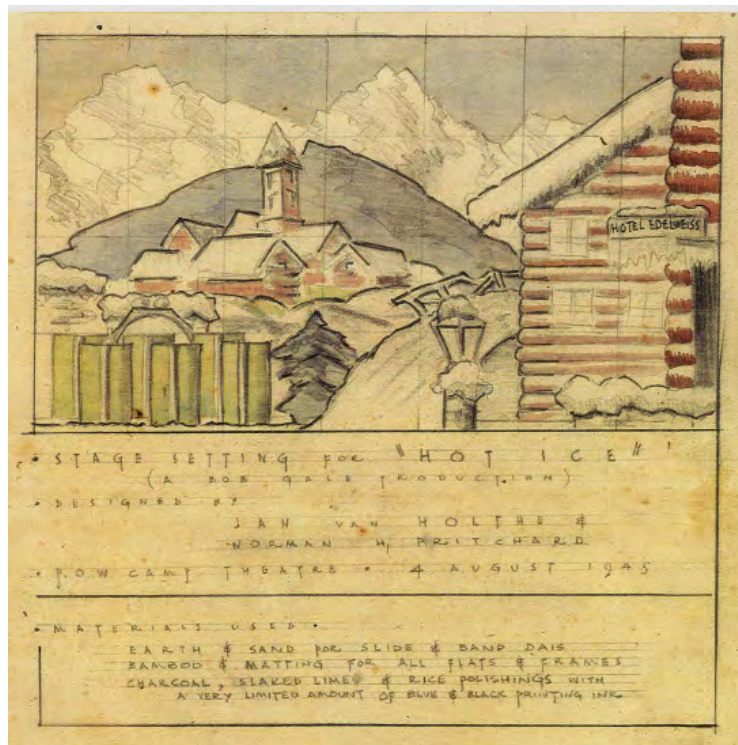


FIGURE 10.12. SET DESIGN FOR *HOT ICE*. JAN VAN HOLTHE AND NORMAN PRITCHARD. COURTESY OF NORMAN PRITCHARD.

With its snow-laden “Hotel Edelweiss” and backdrop of a snow-covered Swiss town and high mountain peaks, the exterior setting for *Hot Ice* is van Holthe and Pritchard’s most complex and beautiful scenic design. As the POWs sat in the audience on a hot and humid tropical evening in Thailand, what could be better than watching a fantasy taking place in a world of snow? Two spectacular scenic features engineered by Jock Cameron and his technicians involved characters entering on a toboggan down a slide up center and a special lighting effect that created the illusion of ice skaters gliding to “The Skaters’ Waltz” (see Chapter 12: “Jolly Good Show!” for details on these two features and other interesting technical aspects of the *Hot Ice* setting).⁸²

“All’s Well that Ends Well”

On 5 August at Kachu Mountain, a Korean guard privately told a POW, “‘All’s well that ends well,’ and added ‘Very soon,’ also ‘RIP, all men rest in peace.’”⁸³ The ambiguity in that mangled English might not have given the POWs much comfort.

On the afternoon of 8 August there was another Allied bombing raid on the nearby town of

Phetchaburi. Two days later Sharp recorded a borehole rumor that the Koreans “are obviously insubordinate now: progressively so, it is said.” In order not to lose control of the situation, the Japanese reissued the camp regulations stating that there should be “no singing or playing of games during working hours.” They “comment[ed] on slack saluting” by the POWs. “Also: no chess sets or other games to be made without permission (We are not supposed to have knives, anyhow!).”⁸⁴

Strange events were taking place at Ubon as well. On 10 August the Japanese announced there would be an all-camp festival on 15 August celebrating the three-and-a-half-year anniversary of the fall of Singapore and the third anniversary of the start of the POW administration in Thailand. The POWs were expected to celebrate these events with a day of sports, but Charles Steel was dubious that the festival would ever take place:

The Nips are also putting on a Concert in their own quarters. For this purpose, they are using a lot of the large quantity of Red Cross clothing they keep for themselves. I know one Sodjo^{xviii} is having a robe made from Red Cross towels, while dozens of blankets have been sewn together for backcloths. Both these articles are badly needed in the Camp.⁸⁵

In the three days (11, 12, and 13 August) leading up to this “celebration,” numerous and insistent rumors of the war’s end made the POWs at Ubon extremely restive. In order to take their minds off their hopes and anxieties, regulations regarding concert parties were relaxed, and they were allowed to put on three successive nights of impromptu variety shows.

Back at Kachu Mountain, the White Pagoda Players’ next production, *Bits and Pieces*, was staged on 12 August. Ironically, its performance coincided with the discovery that the camp stores were full of clothes but most had been destroyed by rats and would have to be burnt.⁸⁶ The next day Sharp wrote, “At 12.30 today all the Nips and Koreans were called to the Camp Office and addressed by an officer—later a Korean cook said all would be over in three days.” Other indications that the end was near resulted in heightened expectations, but no announcement of any change was forthcoming.

Up at Ubon, Steel’s prediction had come true: on 15 August the Japanese suddenly cancelled the sports day, giving the reason that “they were in mourning.”⁸⁷ At Kachu Mountain that day, the Japanese held a celebration that Sharp interpreted as either an “anniversary of foundation of group—or perhaps a farewell party.”⁸⁸

Two days later, ignorant of what had taken place elsewhere on 16 August, Sharp made the following entry in his diary:

17.8 Yasumi [*sic*] today again, except for a few men. We’re very thankful for this rest after the recent hard labour. . . . Koreans said to be disarmed—during the night three were heard “weeping” outside the end hut.^{xix} . . . Nip quartermaster pulls up the notice on the air raid shelter and pissed on it. . . . Drivers returning from Pechburi report scenes of rejoicing there—singing, drinking, dancing, etc.⁸⁹

^{xviii} *Mimicking the Japanese pronunciation of the word “soldier.”*

^{xix} *They knew they would soon be the prisoners of war and could face severe penalties for any “war crimes” committed.*

There was no doubt now that some major event had taken place. But with no announcement from either of the Japanese commandants, the POWs in both Kachu Mountain and Ubon had to be extremely circumspect about what they said and did. Their worlds seemed trapped in suspended animation.

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- 4 Allison, *Begone Dull Care*, 103.
- 5 J. Sharp, Diary, 28 February and 1 March 1945.
- 6 J. Sharp, Diary, 1 March 1945.
- 7 J. Sharp, Diary, 6, 11 March 1945.
- 8 J. Sharp, Diary, 2 March 1945.
- 9 J. Sharp, Diary, 4 March 1945.
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- 11 Best, quoting Steel, Letter 157, 117.
- 12 Dewey, quoting Wilder, 53.
- 13 Allison, *Begone Dull Care*, 103.
- 14 J. Sharp, Diary, 28 February and 15 March 1945; Allison, Letter, 10 October 2000.
- 15 J. Sharp, Diary, 16 March 1945.
- 16 Allison, E-mail, 3 December 2005.
- 17 Allison, *Begone Dull Care*, 103–104.
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- 19 J. Sharp Collection.
- 20 T. Boardman, Letter [2005], 3.
- 21 Allison, E-mail, 3 December 2005.
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- 23 J. Sharp, Diary, 29 March 1945.
- 24 Best, quoting Steel, Letter, 118.
- 25 J. Sharp, Diary, 1 April 1945.
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- 27 J. Sharp, Diary, 12, 14 April 1945.
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- 41 Anckorn, Letter to Prichard, n.d., 3–4.
- 42 Anckorn, Interview, 86.
- 43 Pritchard, Interview with reporter, *Rangoon Liberator* 123 (4 October 1945): n.p.

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- 46 J. Sharp, Diary, 13 May 1945.
- 47 J. Sharp, Diary, 20 May 1945.
- 48 Whittaker, Letter, 23 April 2006.
- 49 J. Sharp, Diary, 21 May 1945.
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- 51 J. Sharp, Diary, 25–26 May 1945.
- 52 J. Sharp, Diary, 1 June 1945.
- 53 J. Sharp, Diary, 1 June 1945.
- 54 J. Sharp, Diary, 11–12 June 1945.
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- 56 J. Sharp, Diary, 23 June 1945.
- 57 J. Sharp, Diary, 25 June 1945.
- 58 J. Sharp, Diary, 27 June 1945.
- 59 J. Sharp, Diary, 30 June 1945.
- 60 Pritchard, “the undefeated . . .,” 6.
- 61 Pritchard, Interview, 70–71.
- 62 Anckorn, Interview, 36.
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- 64 Pritchard, Interview, 31.
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- 71 J. Sharp, Diary, 11 July 1945.
- 72 J. Sharp, Diary, 11 July 1945.
- 73 J. Sharp, Diary, 12 July 1945.
- 74 J. Sharp, Diary, 18 July 1945.
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- 79 Best, quoting Steel, 123.
- 80 Best, quoting Steel, 130.
- 81 Best, quoting Steel, 130.
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- 84 J. Sharp, Diary, 8–12 August 1945.
- 85 Best, quoting Steel, 132.
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Chapter 11: “Out of the Blue Came Freedom”

Victory Shows and Aftermath

Suddenly, the long wait was over. On 15 August,ⁱ Japan surrendered unconditionally, though the official announcement of the end of hostilities wasn't made until the next day. In Thailand, all the camps did not hear the news at the same time. It wasn't just a matter of poor communications; some of the Japanese commandants, fearing reprisals, were reluctant to inform the POWs they were free.

The Announcement

At Nakhon Pathom at 6:30 p.m. on 16 August, Wim Kan was in dress rehearsal with his production of *Maatje Visser Helderziende* (*Maatje Visser, Clairvoyant*), scheduled to open the next afternoon, when one of his cast members, Dr. Berlijn, was called away to attend a meeting with other officers and the Japanese commandant. With Berlijn's departure, the rehearsal came to an end. Kan had just returned to his barracks when he heard cheering and clapping. He ran outside to the theatre area where he saw the British and Dutch flags hoisted, and heard Lieutenant-Colonel Albert Coates make the official announcement that the war was over from the stage. Afterward they sang all the national anthems and the newly freed POWs returned to their barracks for a celebratory meal. “I cannot eat a single bite,” wrote Kan, “because of overwhelming emotions.” Later that evening an impromptu concert was held on the stage, with songs by Captain “Pop” Vardy, Ken Adams, and Eddie Monkhouse.¹

The POWs at Tamuang heard the news in the middle of a concert party. Since late April, all entertainment and games in the camp had been banned, but in late July/early August, the POWs were ordered to construct a proscenium theatre “and be prepared to put on shows again.”² A theatre was quickly built, but no permission to perform was forthcoming.



FIGURE 11.1. DETAIL OF AERIAL PHOTOGRAPH SHOWING TAMUANG THEATRE. IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

This detail from an aerial photograph taken after capitulation shows the Tamuang theatre at upper left.

There were numerous entertainers in Tamuang ready to present a concert party. Following the disastrous *Hollywood Revue* incident in mid-April at Chungkai, Joop Postma, Philip Brugman, Ron Wells,

ⁱ In Japan and the Far East. In Europe and the United States, it would be 14 August.

Wally McQueen, and the other Australian and Dutch entertainers had been sent down to Tamuang. In late June, Bill Bainbridge, Han Samethini, and the rest of the “Swingtette” musicians had joined them.

On 16 August, the Japanese ordered a soccer match in the afternoon and a concert in the evening. The game between Britain and Holland had drawn a large and enthusiastic audience, but the show that evening attracted only a few hundred men out of the 2,000 in camp. One of those was John Cosford:

I was sitting on the edge of the crowd, not taking too much notice, until almost by magic, the audience trebled in number and excitement mounted high. The unfortunate performers were unable to make themselves heard, above the babble of voices, as hundreds of men began to crowd round and on the stage. It was obvious that something very important was about to happen, and I think most of us began to anticipate what it was to be.

The show was stopped. The compère announced that the CO, a British RSM, had something important to say. He came on to the stage, and in a deathly hush started to speak. He said, “The latest rumour in the camp”—that was enough. Nobody waited to hear more. Tremendous cheers rent the air and continued for many minutes . . . it was a long time before the RSM could get everyone quiet again. Eventually he was able to tell us that the war had ended.³

Kanburi Officers’ Camp also heard about the surrender on 16 August just as the latest contingent of men was to leave for Nakhon Nayok. In John Coast’s words, the Kanburi POWs, “went mad.”⁴

Those in more remote sites, like Kachu Mountain and Ubon, were not informed until two days later.

By 18 August at Kachu Mountain, rumors that the war was over were running rampant and seemingly confirmed when Red Cross parcels were distributed and valuables that had been confiscated during searches returned. Games like cards and chess, which had been forbidden during daylight hours, were being played openly. The concert party had been rehearsing all day. (Word was they could now have a concert party every night if they wished.) John Sharp reported, “Almost a Christmas party atmosphere of expectation. . . . Distribution still continues—big issue of Red Cross soap. Nip says, ‘All men wash tomorrow—no smell.’”ⁱⁱ⁵ That evening, the official announcement of the war’s end was made, not by their Japanese commandant but by Mitsushita, the Japanese interpreter.⁶

At Ubon that same evening, Major Chida appeared on the saluting platform during roll call and announced, “The Greater East-Asia War is over.”⁷

ii In POW camps like Kachu Mountain that were not located near a river, supplies of water for bathing were limited or almost nonexistent. And with what was available, the bathing needs of the Japanese took precedence. Many of the Allied officers who first entered the camps remarked on the overwhelming stench of the POWs.

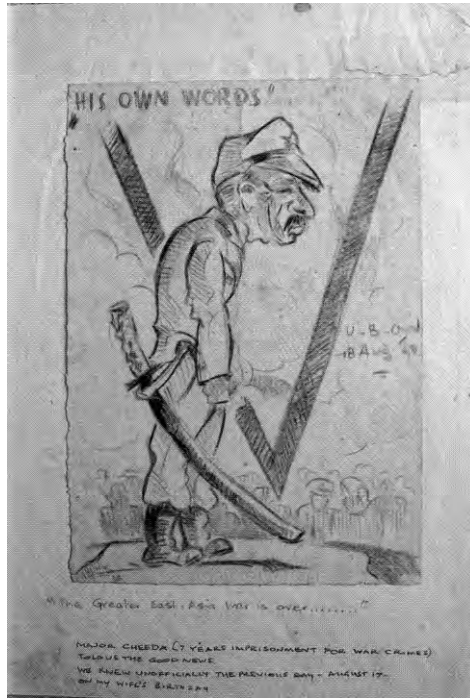


FIGURE 11.2. "His Own Words." JAN VAN HOLTHE. COURTESY OF NORMAN PRITCHARD.

In Jan van Holthe's sketch of the historic moment, Major Chida's sword hangs at his side, making him look like a defeated dog with its tail between its legs.

"The Most Peculiar and Emotional Feeling"

The POWs' reactions to the long-awaited news were not surprising. "There were men unashamed crying, with tears streaming down their faces, others hysterical with delight," observed John Cosford at Tamuang. But Cosford was also aware of another and unexpected response that actually proved more typical: "Many just stood about looking blank and bewildered, not yet able to grasp that the nightmare was as good as over."⁸

At Ubon, both Norman Pritchard and Fergus Anckorn also remembered emotional numbness as the immediate response to the news of their liberation.

PRITCHARD: To start with it was silence . . . after the horror [three and half years of captivity] came silence, as soon as we were told it was all over, we did nothing, just sat down, and just thought, and there was no hilarity, there was no cheering, no shouting—it came later.⁹

ANCKORN: The moment we were told we were free, that was, you know, after we'd been called out of those huts, and the Japanese officer told us—I'd been longing for this day, and I could visualize us chucking our hats up in the air and dancing around. It broke us completely.

We just stood there and drizzled . . . we couldn't believe . . . and when we found it was true, the Union Jack went up and all the rest of it. We just stood there, we didn't speak, and we felt—I felt awful. I wanted to burst [into tears]—something. Nothing came out. And I couldn't believe I was free, the war is over; you've survived. It couldn't get into me.

And it was terrible. Everyone was the same—we just stood there like zombies. Here we'd just been told, "It's all over." And, you know, just couldn't get it. That was the worst of the lot.¹⁰

[To hear Norman Pritchard and Fergus Anckorn give their accounts, listen to **Audio Link 11.1**]

Audio



11.1

After writing that the POWs at Kanburi had gone “mad” on hearing the news, John Coast quickly revised his initial statement:

Well, really, *mad*, was not the right word. It was the most peculiar and emotional feeling that tried and wanted to express itself immediately but didn't know how to do it. . . . Amid the knot of people standing in the darkness several senior officers were forcing their way with jungle torches, collecting a few musical instruments so that at least our pent up emotions could have some outlet in singing “God Save The King.”¹¹

The numbness of emotions long held in check was not to last. British, Australian, American, and Dutch flags, their display previously forbidden, magically appeared and were cheerfully draped across stages or planted over saluting bases. National anthems were sung with great gusto. At Kachu Mountain John Sharp reported that “[a] large ‘V’ sign appeared on the proscenium [header] of the new theatre.” After a roll call, “a concert was organised on the stage—old favorites, swing music and jokes.”¹² The “old favorites,” which had just recently been tedious to listen to, suddenly became beloved once more.

One of these was “Please Don't Talk About Me When I'm Gone,” sung by Tom Boardman accompanied by his camp-made ukulele. In the changed circumstances, the lyrics took on new meaning. Originally they referred to a bittersweet parting between two lovers. But now they seemed to refer to the ex-POWs and their coming departure from Kachu Mountain, from Thailand, and from each other:

*Please don't talk about me when I'm gone,
Oh, honey,
Though our friendship ceases from now on.
And listen, if you can't say anything that's nice,*

*It's better not to talk at all, is my advice.
 We're parting: you go your way, I'll go mine,
 It's best that we do.
 Here's a kiss!
 I hope this brings lots of luck to you.
 Makes no difference how I carry on.
 Remember, please don't talk about me when I'm gone.ⁱⁱⁱ*

[To hear Tom Boardman sing this song while playing his camp-made ukulele, listen to **Audio Link 11.2.**]



A New Challenge

The entertainers were now faced with a new challenge: how to contain and focus the joyful, but chaotic, celebrations.



FIGURE 11.3. "THE NIGHT WE WERE FREE." WALLY DAVIS. IWM 66/308/6-9 (6) AND (9). PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF SEARS ELDREDGE.

After the announcement in the middle of the show at Tamuang, "[t]he concert party led, or rather endeavoured to lead, the crowd in community singing. They found it a hopeless struggle, most men were singing, but there were many impromptu groups, rendering all manner of songs, and most far from being melodious."¹³

ⁱⁱⁱ Music and lyrics by Gene Austin.

During the impromptu concert party at Nakhon Pathom, members of the British concert party suddenly remembered there were POWs in the hospital wards too sick to get to the theatre to join in the festivities, so they took the celebration to them. “Cast members called to adopt costumes and perform in the sick huts,” wrote Jack Chalker. “Ken Adams, van der Cruysen, Nigel Wright, and I, played in sick huts 1, 2, 3.”^{iv14}

At Kanburi, one of the first things done was to free Bill Drower from his “hell-hole.” He had survived the ordeal, but just barely. In most camps the Japanese food and clothing stores were opened and Red Cross packages that had been kept from the troops were distributed.

But the newly freed POWs also had to be cautioned. Though they were indeed free, there were severe restrictions on their behavior. Everyone, according to John Sharp, was expected to abide by the conditions laid down by Allied Command: “The Japanese are held responsible for our safety, food, accommodation, etc. until Allied authorities arrive, and we are officially handed over to them. We are not permitted to leave camp unless on special missions and then we must proceed with an escort for protection against unruly Japanese or Thais.”¹⁵

Victory Shows

One way to channel the ex-POWs’ enthusiasm was to produce “Victory Shows.” Some would be hastily conceived affairs, but in many camps, the entertainers had long been planning for such an event.



FIGURE 11.4. POSTER FOR *HOLD THAT THAIGER*. COURTESY OF HUGH DE WARDENER.

On August 23 at Nakhon Nai, Dudley Gotla presented his “new revue,” *Hold that Thaiger* (a takeoff on the popular song “Hold that Tiger”) directed by Leo Britt in their “New Victory Theatre.” The cast included many familiar faces from shows in previous camps. When asked about his victory show, Gotla wrote, “I remember virtually nothing about it—Perhaps I was in an euphoric/alcoholic haze.”¹⁶

No mention has been found of a victory show at Tamuang other than the spontaneous sing-along following the announcement. But there was a concert that could only have taken place shortly after liberation. In this show the combined Australian-British-Dutch concert party from Chungkai performed

^{iv} These were the surgical wards.

once again, and those who got bashed up during the *Hollywood Interlude* incident got their own back on the hated interpreter “Turtleneck,” who had charged the stage and stopped their show. This time without fear of reprisals, the offending Tarzan sketch “was put on again, and one of our chaps dressed as Turtle Neck, repeated his act on the stage. It took us all in at first,” exclaimed John Cosford, “until the imitation Turtle Neck was thrown bodily into the audience, by the other members of the cast.”¹⁷

At Kachu Mountain, the entertainers boasted that their victory show on 19 August was the “first musical comedy completely devised (said to be original) in Thailand (?)”.¹⁸ It had the curious title *Atlantic Interlude*, as if the performers were cheekily suggesting that the war in Europe had only been an interlude in the middle of a much longer and more costly war in the Pacific.¹⁹

The show was in two parts: a variety show featuring music by Tony Gerrish and his band followed by a radio adaptation of George Bernard Shaw’s comedy *Pygmalion* rewritten by Keith Neighbour and R. Victor West.



FIGURE 11.5. ADVERTISEMENT FOR *PYGMALION*. KEITH NEIGHBOUR.
COURTESY OF GUDRUN TAMANDL.

The latter may appear to be an odd choice, but it is a play about emancipation from oppression. Not surprisingly, the Japanese camp commandant sent word that he was indisposed and could not be present for the performance, “but the interpreter was, and he appeared to be much touched when he was publicly thanked for help in the past.”¹⁹

Other than the impromptu concert on the night of the announcement, the entertainers at Nakhon Pathom did not plan any special victory show: two other shows were already in rehearsal and scheduled for production. That afternoon, Wim Kan’s new play, *Maatje Visser Helderziende* (*Maatje Visser, Clairvoyant*), opened at 3:30 p.m. with an all-Dutch cast. The other production was an original musical comedy, *The Rajah of Coconut*, written by B. W. “Nosher” Brown and produced by Ted Ingram.

¹⁹ If true, this would reveal that resentment over being abandoned in Malaya and Singapore by the British government to focus on the more immediate threat to England by Germany was still simmering within.



FIGURE 11.6. POSTER FOR *THE RAJAH OF COCONUT*. BASIL “AKKI” AKHURST. COURTESY OF RICHARD BROWN.

The harem girl on the show poster by “Akki” is apparently holding out on the Rajah because the single-engine “recce” plane circling overhead signals she will be rescued momentarily. A note on the back declares that *Rajah* was the first musical comedy to be produced in Nakhom Paton [sic] after the “cessation of hostilities.”²⁰ Unfortunately, the poster provides no dates for the performances, but Jack Chalker was on wardrobe crew for the show, so it had to have taken place before he was removed to Bangkok in early September.²¹

In giving a “singular example” of the achievements of the wardrobe staff, Chalker told a humorous story about an accident that happened during one performance:

Apart from costumes and decorative props a singular example of construction and achievement was the manufacture, a few months before our release in Nakorn [sic] Pathom, of a two-man operated elephant made of fine woven bamboo matting. The Elephant was part of a revue called “The Raja of Cocoanut” [sic]. In the elephant scene the animal, with two men inside it, did a lumbering dance about the stage and was then fed with a huge mock tin clearly marked as “Baked Beans.” This was consumed by the elephant with a great deal of abdominal activity and finally was ejected via a back passage onto the stage—accompanied with a great deal of laughter from the audience.

Fortuitously, what happened next brought the house down. This was a matinee performance and the heat must have been about 35C [96F]. The elephant was made of woven bamboo matting coloured grey with a mixture of wood ash and tapioca goo which had dried hard and had begun to revert back to powder. The heat inside the animal must have been appalling, and with the combination of this and asphyxiating dust, the back legs man was overcome

and fainted. The collapse of the rear end of the elephant after eating the baked beans seemed appropriate and hilarious and the gallant fore-legs man managed to drag its sagging carcass off stage where he too collapsed—to the immense applaud[ing] of a satisfied audience.

We quickly extracted the two unconscious men covered in sweat and grey ash, one of whom revived reasonably quickly, but the back-legs wouldn't respond and we had to call for immediate medical help. Back-legs had to be rushed away as an emergency but thankfully revived after an anxious period.²²

The victory shows at Kanburi and Ubon, which had been in the planning stage before the announcement, were, perhaps, the most elaborate.



FIGURE 11.7. KANBURI THEATRE WITH SCENIC ARTISTS AT WORK ONSTAGE. PHOTOGRAPH. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL.

Besides the photograph of the theatre at Kanburi taken after the Japanese surrender seen earlier in Chapter 9 (see **Figure 9.7**), there is the one above showing the set designer Fred “Smudger” Smith onstage (left of center) with other artists working on a scenery piece for their victory show. Behind them is a backdrop on which the flags of Australia, Great Britain, the United States, and the Netherlands have been painted. On either side are wings painted with red, white, and blue bunting. The scenic piece being worked on is a giant map of Europe and the Mediterranean that will be flown in from the grid during the show. Whether this map was for a lecture by one of the liberators about the war in Europe or for a satiric sketch about being in the “forgotten war” in Southeast Asia is not known.

The theatre seen in the photograph desperately needs refurbishing: atap is missing from the header over the façade, vines have grown up onto the side walls of the proscenium, and the top of the proscenium sags slightly.

Regardless of the state of the theatre, the victory show was a splendid affair. Performer John Durnford wrote, “[it] can only be described in the Australian phrase, ‘a bonzer.’ In the place of honour hitherto claimed by ‘The Frog,’ ‘The Undertaker,’ Shimojo,^{vi} and their henchmen, sat the Thai governor of Kanburi province, his police officers and legal experts, and the manager of the local paper-factory.”²³

The show contained “Biggles” Bywaters’ final version of the “Kensington Girls” number that “became, with a minimum of rehearsal, ‘Tokyo Boys from Tokyo Town.’ Shouting, bowing, saluting, strutting and hissing they were word-perfect,” wrote Durnford. “Vindictive? Possibly, but understandable. Even so there was more burlesque than malice in our wit. The item was cordially approved by His Excellency, and repeated. This time we excelled ourselves. But the last chorus looked forward, not back. There would soon be ‘Bluebirds over the White Cliffs of Dover,’ we assured the audience.”²⁴

At Ubon, the morning after the POWs were told they were free, an Allied airplane flew over and seven men parachuted “out of the blue” and into the camp. These new arrivals were Lieutenant-Colonel David Smiley, an officer in the Special Operations Force (S.O.E. 136) who had been trained in Ceylon to infiltrate Thailand and instruct Free Thai guerillas; an American captain; and five Indian medics.²⁵ Smiley remembered he “had to stand alone on the stage and answered questions shot at me by the ex-POWs who had received no mail for over three and a half years. The Japanese commandant admitted to me that he had deliberately held up all the letters for the prisoners.”²⁶ Contemplating the significance of that moment, “Toothy” Martin wrote, “You may feel that *this* was the most dramatic and useful show given in the theatre over the few months of its existence.”²⁷

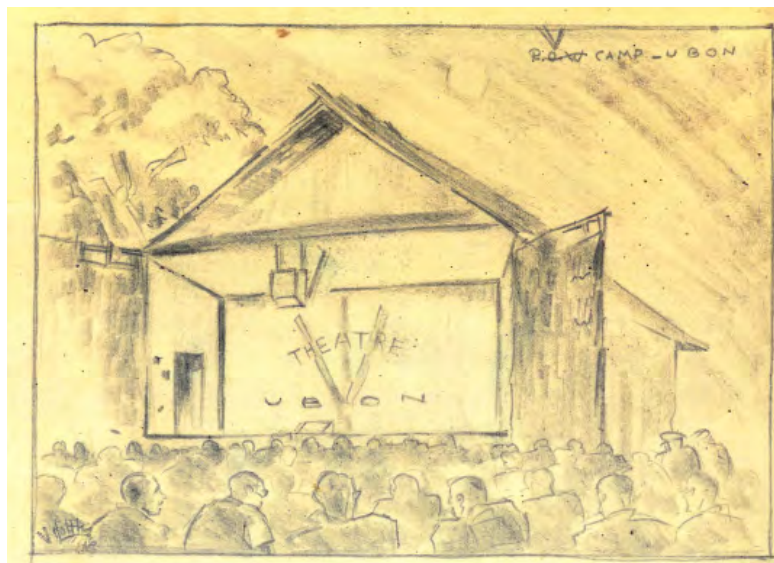


FIGURE 11.8. UBON THEATRE. SKETCH. JAN VAN HOLTHE. COURTESY OF NORMAN PRITCHARD.

The next evening, 20 August, the Ubon concert party presented their victory show. In honor of the occasion, the front curtain of the theatre had been painted with a huge “V” and Bob Gale had composed a victory song.

“I well remember Bob sweating out the only song he had to write,” recalled Norman Pritchard.

^{vi} POW nicknames respectively for Lieutenant Takaziki, Noguchi’s second in command; for a Korean guard (another of Noguchi’s underlings); and for Sergeant Shimojo, Noguchi’s “enforcer,” who was much hated.

In those last two or three days before Major [Chida] told us that the war in South East Asia was over, Bob was working on a victory song, for the Concert Party to include in the first show we put on as free men.

Poor old Bob! He normally wrote his songs when he had an inspiration. (Can you imagine now how he ever had any inspiration out there?) But the victory song had to be written. And he did. It was finished an hour or two before the curtain went up. . . . By the time the Concert Party had learned the words, and had sung the song several times, it was already a “best seller” in the camp. The audience knew the tune at least before the show—they were listening outside.

The song? It was entitled “Out of the Blue.” The words? I think I can still remember them—

*Out of the blue came freedom,
The freedom that we’ve all been waiting for.
Out of the blue came freedom,
The freedom that we know we all adore.
We’re gonna start to build a new world,
A world of peace we’ve all been waiting for.
So thank you, Uncle Joe, John Bull and Uncle Sam,
For bringing us our freedom once more.*

After singing the chorus once, there was a wonderful vocal obligato which led us into the chorus again. It was one of those da-da-da-da-do choral efforts that was never ending. Every time we thought we had sung the chorus for the last time, someone would start the “intro” again, and off we went. We must have sung that freedom song twenty times on that special celebration evening.²⁸

[To hear Norman Pritchard sing “Out of the Blue,” listen to **Audio 11.3**.]

Audio



11.3

It wasn’t just the song that was a huge success: so was the show, and the performers had to repeat it immediately.

Anckorn’s memories of their victory show were no less powerful than Pritchard’s. For the finale, Jock Cameron and his crew of scenic technicians had managed to top all their earlier achievements:

It was our big closing show . . . wonderful show. We were so happy on that night. . . . And this huge plane came down [slowly lowered] from up in the [flies] . . . you couldn’t see it until it came down. The propellers were turning—and four engines. And people [were] in it, and down it came. And

they all got out and cheered and waved flags. That was all done on this little stage, no bigger than that [indicating the size of his living room]. . . . It was a tremendous finale, it really was.

And I remember we were so happy, we knew the war was over; we knew we'd survived . . . we'd given 'em a good show.²⁹

As it descended, the aircraft's wingspan "was almost from side to side of the stage."³⁰

[To hear Fergus Anckorn tell this story, listen to **Audio Link 11.4**]

Audio



11.4

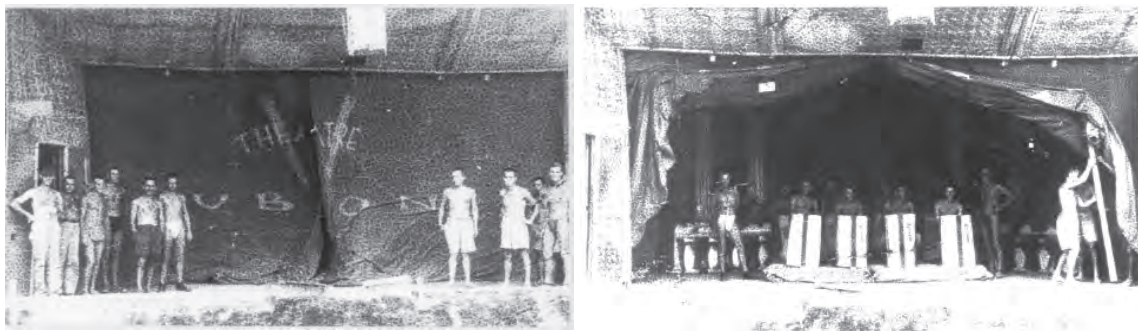


FIGURE 11.9. & FIGURE 11.10. Two PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE UBON THEATRE. IWM PHOTOGRAPH ARCHIVE HU 65698 & HU65691.

Two photographs taken by one of the camp's liberators show close-ups of the Ubon stage. In one, the curtains are closed and newly liberated ex-POWs stand on either side revealing the camp name and large "V" painted on it; in the other, the curtains are pulled back, revealing the Kings of Swing orchestra seated behind their bandstands with their conductor, "Ace" Connolly, standing at left. Bits of painted scenery—fluted columns in the background and a low balustrade on either side of the band—can be seen dimly.

But as Pritchard made clear, even having the whole concert repeated the same night did not quell the men's need to express their elation. Pritchard explained what they did next:

And . . . after these two shows, we were so balled up. . . . The huts . . . hundreds of yards long, some of them, and we went [through them], the band and us. We processed up and down the camp . . . and it so happened that that way [indicating a direction], it worked out, was the Japs. Their enclosure—barbed-wired off—was down the end past the last hut that we came to. By the time we got there, the Japs had gone! (They must have thought we were a lynching party.)³¹

Mergui Road

Elsewhere in Thailand were camps where no victory shows were ever produced. These were the construction camps where POWs had been sent to construct fortifications and other contingencies to aid in the Japanese defense against the invasion of Burma by Allied Forces. One set of camps was in southern Thailand along the Mergui Road construction project.

In the spring of 1945, POWs from Nakhon Pathom and other camps were sent halfway down the Kra Peninsula to construct the Mergui Road from Prachuap Khiri Khan on the Gulf of Siam across the peninsula to Mergui on the Burmese coast. Many romusha also worked on this project. The road was to be used, if need be, by the Japanese as an escape route for their army in Burma.³² Instead of being returned to base camps after its completion, the POWs were ordered to stay on as maintenance crews.³³ Living and working conditions on the construction project were horrendous.

Len Gibson, a major performer in the Wampo concert party during the railway construction and more recently at Nakhon Pathom hospital camp, was one of the workers. "On April 1945 I started work on the Mergui Road," he recalled. "There were a thousand in the workforce but by August there were only about three hundred left. I think I was the only instrumentalist there and continued to sing around the camp fires at night."³⁴

The POWs heard about the end of the war on 16 August, but, knowing it would be some while before they were liberated, Gibson and his friends decided to march west towards Mergui on the Andaman Sea, where, they reasoned, they would be rescued earlier. It was a long march, and they were not in good physical condition. When they reached the next camp at Maudung, they nearly collapsed.

Some medical orderlies met us to assist the stragglers and one of them was most interested in my guitar. "Can you play that?" he asked. He was an Eurasian lad, probably a Singapore Volunteer. "We have had no music here at all. Would you play round the huts?" When I replied in the affirmative, he was delighted and whilst still helping one poor straggler, he led me down into the camp.

What I saw appalled me. I thought I'd seen some bad camps in my years as a POW, but this was the worst ever. Not surprisingly I learned later that it was named "DEATH VALLEY."

The first hut I approached had no walls. I had to sit at the entrance and peer in. The smell was terrible and not one of the inmates could even stir. The glad news of the ending of the war had not done much to revive these poor devils.³⁵

After playing a few songs, Gibson proceeded to the next hut, where he was surprised to find three men he knew. After exchanging a few words, he moved on.

I finished off at a hut where the chaps there had not been able to cope with the strain. They seemed mentally drained.

After another rice and gippo meal I just collapsed into the nearest empty space and slept.³⁶

Making better progress on their march the next day, Gibson and his companions finally caught sight of the Andaman Sea and realized their journey to freedom was nearly over.

Liberation

With so many POW camps scattered all over Thailand, it would take time for officers from Mountbatten's South-East Asia Command to organize an orderly liberation and repatriation scheme. Most of the British, Australian, and American POWs would first have to be transferred to Bangkok for further processing before they could be sent home. Those in large camps, like Nakhon Pathom (which was close to Bangkok), would be among the earliest liberated, but even that process would take weeks. Those in more remote and isolated areas would require more time. Meanwhile, the men would just have to wait. After three and a half years of waiting, this delay was not what the men wanted. They wanted to get home and were eager to know how soon they could expect that dream to become reality.

In this atmosphere of anxiety and anticipation, the entertainers' services were needed more than ever. Their task remained the same—to provide diversion to help pass the time—but now they had to temper the men's energies, not, as in the past, reignite them. Typical of the challenges they faced trying to keep the newly freed POWs attention, is what happened at Kachu Mountain.

By 20 August, the day after the victory concert, the emotional highs of the previous two days had already diminished, and John Sharp observed how the swift passage from captivity to freedom, from scarcity to plenty, had exposed the difficulty many POWs would have in their ability to cope with what they had just survived: "Plenty of food—no one wants it now. . . . Holiday atmosphere persists—some men are already complaining of boredom."³⁷

With their new remit, the small concert party at Kachu Mountain went back to work. The stage was refurbished and decorated for "expected arrivals"—officers from South-East Asia Command—and nightly performances were meant to allay the men's restlessness and boredom. This schedule soon taxed the entertainers' abilities to come up with new material, and there was fear that the shows would become repetitious and boring. To help them keep the concerts going, the entertainers were excused from all work details and permitted to rehearse all day.³⁸

One night Tony Gerrish and his band held a "Campfire Community Concert" on the parade ground.

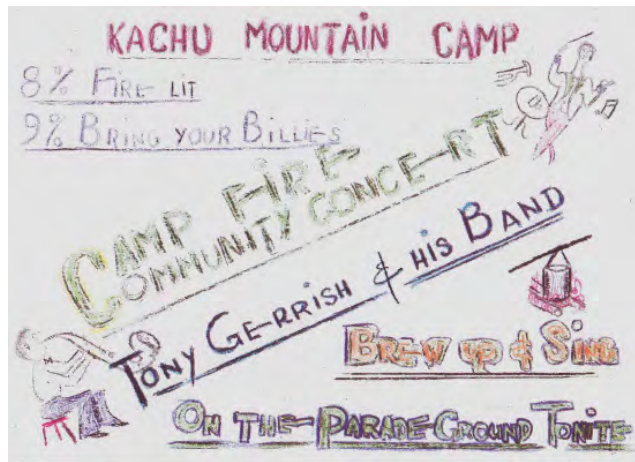


FIGURE 11.11. "CAMPFIRE COMMUNITY CONCERT." COURTESY OF JOHN SHARP.

Unfortunately for the POWs, the "brew" referred to on the crudely drawn poster would mean only tea.

But teetotaling did not hold true for everyone. The next day there was great consternation among the ex-POWs over word that their officer in charge (plus senior staff members) had engaged in a drinking party with the commandant in his office. It was rumored that the Japanese commandant had even performed a hula dance—and then asked the men to take no notice of it as he had gotten "a little drunk." He wasn't the only one. Though their leaders tried to deny it, someone had seen the British warrant officer being "carried to his hut," where he "fell over his bed, spewed, lay across the mosquito net and pull[ed] it down."³⁹ The lies about the incident only fueled the men's long-standing resentment against their leadership.

The next night the concert party presented a musical quiz and radio plays.⁴⁰ Jim Whittaker remembered that one of the questions "was to name three sister acts, expecting such answers as The Andrew Sisters, but John [Sharp] came up with the names of three sisters apparently from the world of opera or classical music."^{vii41}

When the "expected arrivals" did not show the next day, the POWs became even more disgruntled as they waited for news about when they might be sent home. With all the Red Cross food parcels consumed and supplies not arriving on schedule, the food situation was becoming dire. Adding to the deteriorating morale, there was no concert that night. But on the next night, 23 August, the concert contained a "radio broadcast" of the news the men had been anxiously awaiting: "heard of King's statement that we shall be home in six week's time."⁴²

Still Mountbatten's representatives did not arrive, and the mood in the camp remained sour in spite of the concert parties. "Men restless at the ineptitude (alleged) of camp office," Sharp wrote, "saying that some action should be taken about food etc." To stop men from breaking out of the camp in search of food, a perimeter patrol was instituted. In the midst of this unrest, the concert party put up their next show on 25 August.⁴³

Eventually, officials did arrive from Nakhon Pathom. Laurie Allison was present in the crowd gathered outside the orderly room:

^{vii} Actually, they were from Anton Chekhov—The Three Sisters.

He spoke of the huge bomb that had devastated two Japanese cities. We surrounded him and bombarded him with questions, but he mounted the camp stage and told us as much news as he could. I was still sick and the next two days passed in a haze but I remember we all stood in front of the stage and sang “God Save the King.”⁴⁴

Further Revelations

While awaiting liberation, the ex-POWs at Ubon made two startling discoveries: during their months in the aerodrome camp, they had not been alone. Pritchard tells the story:

A British Sergeant [one of their liberators] asked us in the concert party what had happened on the evening the Japs stopped the show because the comedian waved his walking stick around. We told him the Japs’ decision. But . . . “How did you know what occurred some months earlier?” His reply shook [us] up.

“I was there.” And he had been in our camp several times seeking information on reconnaissance! What courage!⁴⁵

They had not been alone at Nong Pladuk, either. During the bombing raid on 6 September, a Thai captain attached to the British Army (code name “Pluto”) had parachuted into the camp and been with them ever since.⁴⁶



FIGURE 11.12. “OUT OF THE BLUE CAME . . .” JAN VAN HOLTHE. COURTESY OF NORMAN PRITCHARD.

Van Holthe's poster commemorates all the men involved in the POWs' liberation at Ubon.

At Kanburi, another and much more disturbing discovery was in store. On 23 August, the ex-POWs were suddenly plunged back in time when British and Dutch/Indonesians who had been sent up the line to Kran Krai/250 Kilo and beyond months earlier to build defensive fortifications for the Japanese arrived back at the rail station. Coast was outraged by what he saw:

A tottering stream of just human beings, nearly all Dutch Eurasians, was making its halting way into the camp, and with them they brought that unforgettable, indescribable smell that had been part of our lives for so long—the musty, decaying smell of the jungle vegetation; the acrid, bitter stench of dirt, dirt ingrained into the bodies and become a part of the skin; and underlying it all the stink of sick men, of dysentery, of unhealthiness. . . . There were 700 of them. And if these first were the fittest, what in God's name would the rest be like?⁴⁷

Coast and other volunteers rushed to help unload those who were not ambulatory from the railroad boxcars.

The sight of those trucks was unforgettable and unforgivable. Englishmen, clad in sacking, gaunt, hollow-eyed, just bones, their skin flaking off in great dirty brown patches, Indische Jongens, one of the personally cleanest of peoples, yellow and jaundiced, lying bleakly in the unspeakable mess of the floor of the trucks. And yet in spite of all their misery and pain and sickness, they were already saved in nearly every case; for we could see in their wide eyes the knowledge that it was OVER, that all the bloodiness of work, beatings, pig-food and jungle existence was OVER, and that that had already lit the vital, spiritual spark in their poor bodies, and a terrific and desperate will to live had already been born in them again. Within half-an-hour they were all in hospital.⁴⁸

Galvanized into action, the men at Kanburi bathed, clothed, and fed these wretched souls while the doctors and orderlies went about their bandaging and healing business. While engaged in this activity, Coast discovered an old friend from Chungkai days, "Huib van Laar,"^{viii} an artist who had done so many of our Chungkai theatre posters."

He called me over to him by name, and almost weeping he said, "Don't you recognise me?" I just could not see who it was, and wasn't even sure it was a Dutchman. Then he said his name and I tried to see a likeness to the man I had worked with for months less than a year ago, but in that thin, bearded, hollow

^{viii} Coast gives him the pseudonym of Janssen in his memoir.

face with despairing eyes, I could see none. I found him a blanket, some dry kit and clothes and did my best to cheer him up. He had dysentery and malaria, but was over the worst. . . .

When my friend van Laar was strong enough to speak, he told me that to see dysentery cases on parade with blood streaming down the back of their legs and compelled to work was not uncommon. On reading through some of the atrocity accounts in the Camp Office, I discovered that van Laar himself, after being made to work with dysentery and malaria with a temperature of 104°, tried to throw himself in the river, being mentally deranged. He was rescued, but could mercifully remember nothing of it now.⁴⁹

During his last week in Kanburi, Coast went down to Tamuang, where a more pleasant surprise awaited him: “I walked onto the stage of the theatre there, and found my old Dutch producer friends rehearsing one of the same shows that they’d put on with such success in the early days at Chungkai.^{ix} And I found my old friends of the Javanese dancing and Kronchong party days, alive and well.”⁵⁰ The discovery of “Tari” and the other men must have been particularly gratifying to Coast, as he had grown to love these Indonesian performers as well as their music and dancing.^x

Repatriation

The repatriation of the thousands of POWs on the railway was logistically complex and a necessarily slow business. This time the men at Kachu Mountain lucked out. The airstrips they had built for the Japanese Air Force proved capable of handling Allied aircraft, and when food and medical supplies were brought in, they were exchanged for men who were then airlifted to Rangoon, Burma.⁵¹

Processing

As most of the ex-POWs were brought to Bangkok for initial processing, the city turned into a huge transit camp. In early September, the evacuation of Nakhon Pathom began, with the heavy sick being sent to hospitals in Bangkok. Weary Dunlop was part of this initial draft and, once in Bangkok, sent a note back requesting Jack Chalker join him so he could complete his medical sketches and other drawings that would be such a vital record of their lives as POWs. While the men waited in Bangkok for their transport home, concert parties were reorganized and shows performed under orders from the welfare officer at the ex-POW headquarters in Bangkok.

One of these concert parties was a combined Australian–Dutch/Indonesian troupe organized by Lieutenant Rae Nixon that was comprised of former members of the Tamarkan Players and Joop Postma’s Het Hollandsche cabaret from Chungkai.

^{ix} These were Joop Postma, Philip Brugman, and Ferry van Delden.

^x After the war, Coast was instrumental in bringing an Indonesian dance troupe to the United Kingdom.



FIGURE 11.13. AUSTRALIAN-DUTCH/INDONESIAN CONCERT PARTY. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF TED WELLER.

This photograph of Nixon's concert party was taken on 24 September 1945 on the steps of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce Association building in Bangkok, where they performed a series of shows.

Rae Nixon stands in the back row to the right of the bass drum in his officer's hat. Han Samethini, in a white jacket and dark tie, stands in front at far left as the orchestra conductor. In the second row at the left, the first female impersonator is Ted Weller (Ron Wells, the show's producer, had convinced him to make one last appearance in this role).^{x152} Next to him, in the grass skirt and coconut-shell brassiere, is "Sambal Sue."^{x11} Major Jim Jacobs saw the show on the thirtieth and thought it "excellent."⁵³

Homeward Bound

After processing, the American, British, and Australian ex-POWs would be sent to Allied military hospitals for complete physicals before transferring to transport ships waiting to take them on the next leg of their long journey home.^{x111} Early October found former members of the Ubon concert party in Rangoon, where they put on two performances for the regular British Army troops that had liberated Burma. At one of these shows they sang Bob Gale's "It's Grand to See You Again," which had been composed for a show in Nong Pladuk back in November 1944. In this new context, the lyrics took on a joyful reality.

^{x1} Further identified by the Ted written on the bib of his dress.

^{x11} Identifications (from front to back and left to right): Front row: Han Samethini (orchestra conductor) – A. ("Lex") Koot (violinist) – Vince Broe (saxophone player) – Bollen (clarinet) – Unknown (guitar) – ?Jan Liefveld (cornet) – T. Biderris (cornet) – Unknown (trombone) – Unknown w/ glasses (accordion) – Unknown (accordion). Second row: Henk Spoor (bass viol) – Ted Weller (female impersonator) – "Sambal Sue" (with grass skirt and coconut bra, as in Nixon's costume sketch) – ?Sid "Happy" Marshall (female impersonator identified by Morris as "tall, thin, black curly hair"). On the right: ?Jack Farmer (female impersonator) – "Ferry" van Delden (powdered wig and jabot) – Uilke "Puck" Jonkmans (female impersonator in an eighteenth-century dress and powdered wig) – ?Dick Jansen (guitar) – ?Hans Arriens (accordion player). Third row: Joop Postma – Dick Moray? – Unknown – Val Ballantyne; on the right: the Ockerse Trio (three guitar players wearing leis): ?Harry Reinders, Alfonse Ockerse, and John Ockerse. Fourth row: Unknown (with white belt) – Frank Brydges (scenic artist) – C. J. Coles-Smith (drummer) – Lieutenant Rae Nixon (with hat; O'ie Concert Party) – Unknown (white outfit). Names of other Australian performers in the group were published in the Sydney paper when this photograph was printed, but there is no discernible pattern as to which names belong to which figures.

^{x111} The British ex-POWs were flown to Rangoon, Burma; the Americans to Calcutta, India; and the Australians sent by rail down to Singapore.

*It's grand to see you again,
 Tho' so many days have gone by.
 It's grand to hold you again in my arms.
 It's grand to kiss you again;
 I'm so overwhelmed I could cry.
 And say, "You've got me again with your charms."*

*Let's make this day of reunion,
 Something we'll never forget.
 Let's turn back the pages of romance,
 To the very first day that we met.*

*It's grand to see you again,
 It's something I might have known.
 It's grand to hold you again—my own.⁵⁴*

[To hear Norman Pritchard sing this Bob Gale song, listen to **Audio Link 11.5**]

Audio



11.5

The soldiers' response to the show was wildly enthusiastic, and they informed the Ubon troupe, "We don't want ENSA now—send them home—you stay!"^{xiv55}

Once on board ships taking them home, the indefatigable entertainers would again organize concert parties to entertain bored and anxious troops, just as they had on their way out to the Far East.

^{xiv} ENSA, the British civilian entertainment organization, which had started touring shows to British military bases in the Far East during the war, must have continued to live up to its reputation, "Every Night Something Awful!"



FIGURE 11.14. "SHIPBOARD CONCERT." CARTOON BY FRED "SMUDGER" SMITH. COURTESY OF FRED RANSOME-SMITH.

Fred "Smudger" Smith drew this cartoon of the shipboard concert *Chop SueZ* produced by John D. V. Allum as they headed toward the Suez Canal on their way back to England. The pianist-vocalist was Fred Ward, Smith's head peeks around the curtain in the background, and Allum is to his right.

On Hold

If the repatriation of British, Australian, and American troops had been slow, there were two other groups of workers on the Thailand-Burma railway whose repatriation would take even longer—or not happen at all. Although the British and Australians did make attempts to repatriate many of the thousands of Asian conscripts (*romusha*) the Japanese had brought from all over their Southeast Asian "empire" to work on the railway, many remained behind in Burma and Thailand.

For the Netherlands East Indies troops, there was another reason for the delay. On 17 August, the day following the announcement of Japan's surrender, Indonesian leaders Sukarno and Mohammad Hatta declared a war for independence from Dutch colonial rule. As the N.E.I. POWs in Thailand were composed of Dutch, Indische Jorgens, and Indonesian troops, no one was sure where their loyalties might lie, so they had to wait in Thailand until some authority could decide what to do with them while the war for independence played itself out.

Wim Kan and his small troupe of entertainers had been removed from Nakhon Pathom Hospital to Bangkok in late September. On the twenty-fifth, they began to perform a series of cabarets at the Alliance Française, at the hospital, and for Bangkok Radio. Kan even mounted a new production of his one-act comedy, *Maatje Visser*.⁵⁶

But the majority of the N.E.I. troops were forced to remain in their hospital and relocation camps up country, and therefore, according to Lieutenant-Colonel P. G. Mantel, the Entertainments Officer, "[T]he mountain camps are screaming for Wim Kan, so he has to leave on a tour immediately."⁵⁷ Actually, both Kan and Joop Postma were asked to create touring companies to perform in the camps.

One of the first stops on their circuit would be Kachu Mountain. After the British and Australians had evacuated the camp, a group of N.E.I. ex-POWs had taken it over, including J. G. Julsing, still keeping his record of all the entertainment he witnessed. On 17 October he noted Joop Postma's *Hollandsch*

Cabaret at Phetburi.^{xv} From there the tours would go on to Nakhon Pathom, Tamuang, and Kanburi.

Before leaving with Postma's group, Han Samethini had secured permission from Colonel Mantel to recruit any new musicians he found in the camps to replace those he had lost when the Australians sailed home. At Tamuang, he found the saxophone player Lou Bloemhard; elsewhere, "The Atomic Boys," led by Piet Bruyn van Rozenburg, a small dance band led by van Hofstede, and "The Zoo"—a trio consisting of Frans de Haan, Hans van Leeuwen, and Jaap Schaap.^{xvi} At the end of the tour, these musicians were brought back to Bangkok.⁵⁸

Wim Kan's cabaret performed at Phetburi on 21 October, at Nakhon Pathom, where they did three shows (one in a hospital ward), and then at Tamuang and Kanburi. In Kanburi, they received a "fabulous reception" and Arie Grendel joined their troupe. On 28 October they visited the deserted camp at Tamarkan, viewed the bombed-out steel bridge, and went for a swim in the Mae Khlong.^{xvii59}

When the two tour groups returned to Bangkok, Mantel asked Kan, Samethini, and Postma to "organize cabaret and dance evenings for the army members and the ex-POWs," and an old dance hall was turned into a nightclub.⁶⁰ According to Bloemhard, "Every Ex-POW in Bangkok came to know the Holland Club where one of the above bands would play every evening."⁶¹

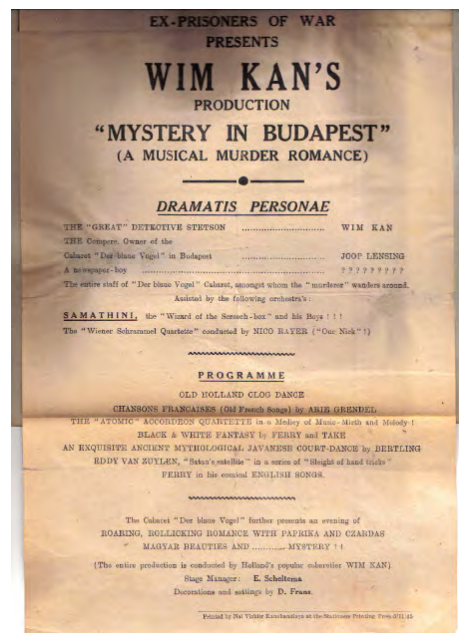


FIGURE 11.15. PROGRAM FOR *MYSTERY IN BUDAPEST*. HAN SAMETHINI COLLECTION. COURTESY OF ROBIN KALHORN.

Around 5 November, Wim Kan presented a show entitled *Mystery in Budapest* at the Holland Café with members of his and Postma's group. The imagined setting for this "Musical Murder Romance" was "Der blaue Vogel" Cabaret in Budapest. Music for the show was provided by Samethini "and his Boys" as well as Nico Rayer ("Our Nick"!). Besides other items on the playbill was "An Exquisite Ancient Mythological, Javanese Court-Dance by Bertling [Tari]. The female impersonators who played "Paprika"

^{xv} An alternate name for the camp.

^{xvi} Whose Dutch names translate as "Rooster," "Lion," and "Sheep."

^{xvii} The first of thousands of tourists who have since visited the "bridge on the River Kwai."

and the “Czardas Magyar Beauties” are not identified.

The N.E.I. troops were gradually removed from their up country camps to Bangkok and placed together with evacuees from the civilian internment camps in Indonesia in a transit camp outside the city. As representatives of Dutch colonial rule, the civilians had been evacuated to Bangkok to escape reprisal in the ongoing war for independence. On 8 November Kan met his wife and partner Corrie Vonk.⁶² It would be 1946 before the N.E.I. ex-POWs at Kanburi were evacuated down the line to Bangkok. During the long wait, they refurbished their dilapidated theatre in anticipation of further touring shows out of Bangkok.

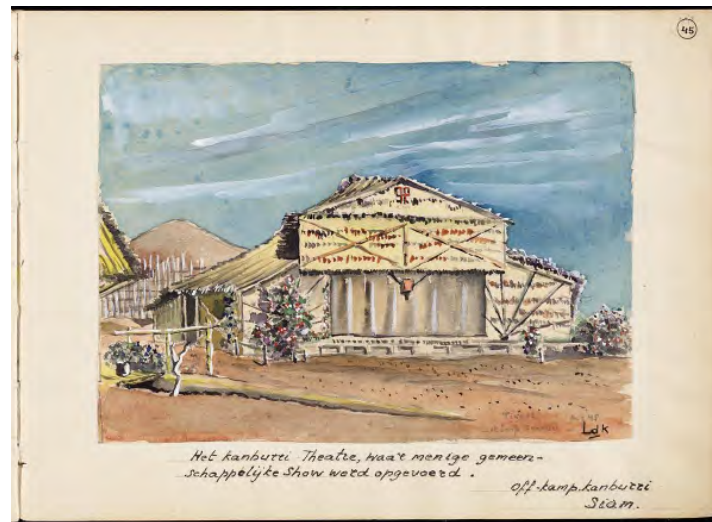


FIGURE 11.16. WATERCOLOR SKETCH OF KANBURI THEATRE. L. D. DE KROON, IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

Lodewikus de Kroon’s watercolor shows the Kanburi theatre newly refurbished with fresh atap, the unruly vines removed, and façade of the proscenium header shortened with the removal of the additional side panels. The slight sag in the top of the proscenium has also been straightened out and front curtains made from rice sacking have been hung in place. A smaller light box is suspended from the proscenium over center stage. At left stands a tree decorated with ornaments. Smaller shrubs, similarly decorated, are placed at right. It is Christmas 1945.

1946

The last record of a performance taking place in any ex-POW Camp in Thailand is 4 January 1946 at Kachu Mountain, where Wim Kan’s comedy *Roland ons Kind* was produced.⁶³ Whether Kan had a hand in this production is not known.

By 1 March 1946, Kan and his wife were back in Holland. With the war for independence still raging, those Dutch and Dutch/Indonesian soldiers scheduled for return to Indonesia would not get to sail for home until September. After arriving in N.E.I.-controlled Surabaya in East Java, they would be given the opportunity to stay in Indonesia, or, as Dutch citizens, be repatriated to the Netherlands.⁶⁴

The Things They Carried Home

Besides the hundreds of artifacts brought back by the ex-POWs as tangible reminders of three and a half years of captivity were numerous souvenirs of the musical and theatrical activities produced on the Thailand-Burma railway. These were mementos that did not recall the starvation and brutality or the sickness and death but rather the times of sharing in songs and laughter that had brought them hope and helped save their lives.



FIGURE 11.17. TOM BOARDMAN HEADS HOME WITH HIS CAMP-MADE UKULELE.
PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF TOM BOARDMAN.

For the entertainers, the artifacts they brought back served an additional purpose: “With us of course went our ukuleles, accordions, violins, trumpets, clarinets, etc.,” wrote Tom Boardman, “as reminders of how we did our bit in providing, as best we could, the entertainment that helped ‘To keep going the spirit that kept us going’ in the previous three and a half years of hell on earth.”⁶⁵



FIGURE 11.18. FRAGMENT OF SCENERY. COURTESY OF NORMAN PRITCHARD.

Before leaving Ubon, Norman Pritchard cut this small rectangle of woven bamboo scenery with daubs of red, white, and blue paint on it from the setting for their victory show.⁶⁶



FIGURE 11.19. CAMP-MADE EVENING GOWN. CHARLES WOODHAMS. IWM COLLECTIONS EPH 1218.

Charles Woodhams brought home this evening gown he made out of mosquito net and rice sacking for use in his jungle shows.



FIGURE 11.20. FRANKIE QUINTON'S ACCORDION. FIGURE 11.21. CLOSE-UP OF ACCORDION KEYBOARD. COURTESY OF MRS. FRANKIE QUINTON.

As an aid to his memory, Frankie Quinton inscribed all the places he had performed as a soldier on the keys of his accordion. (To hear Frankie Quinton perform one of his signature numbers recorded shortly after his return to England, listen to **Audio Link 11.6**).

Audio



11.6

Adjusting to civilian life would be difficult for many former POWs. They had changed, and the world they knew had changed—irrevocably. They were not welcomed back as conquering heroes, as other troops had been, but had to face criticism that as prisoners they had opted out of the war—that they had it easy.

The most difficult adjustments were personal. As there was little acknowledgement of post-traumatic stress, the ex-POWs were frequently told to take an aspirin or a “cuppa” and get on with their lives. Many did just that. But in Jimmy Walker’s experience, getting on with their lives was not as easy as that:

Many of us found marriage and indeed all human contacts difficult. We were not the laughing boys who had sailed away so long ago. Wives found it hard to relate to suspicious-minded men. Men who awakened them in the night with screams about “dirty Japs” as nightmares plagued their beings. Men who looked at other men and wondered how *they* would’ve behaved in starvation circumstances.

Like many, my “tiny tots” were grown children and deeply suspicious and even resentful of this stranger coming into their house and sleeping with their mother, usurping their place in her affections.^{xviii67}

What they had endured as prisoners of war was seared into their consciousness and would remain there forever.

Nearly 13,000 POWs died on the railway. The number of romusha who perished is estimated at 80,000. Japanese deaths tally around 100. It became commonplace to claim a life was lost for every sleeper laid on the Thailand-Burma railway

Endnotes

- 1 Kan, Diary, 17 August 1945; trans. by Margie Bellamy.
- 2 Cosford, 177–178.
- 3 Cosford, 179.
- 4 Coast, 228.
- 5 John Sharp, Diary, 18 August 1945.
- 6 John Sharp, Diary, 18 August 1945.
- 7 Van Holthe, inscription on sketch.
- 8 Cosford, 179–180.
- 9 Pritchard, Interview, 27.
- 10 Anckorn, Interview, 78–79.
- 11 Coast, 229.
- 12 John Sharp, Diary, 18 August 1945.

^{xviii} For the FEPOW wives’ side of the story, see Julie Summers’ *Stranger in the House* (London: Simon & Schuster Ltd., 2008).

- 13 Cosford, 180.
- 14 Chalker, Letter, 7 October 2005.
- 15 John Sharp, Diary, 22 August 1945.
- 16 Gotla, Letter, 8 September 2001.
- 17 Cosford, 140.
- 18 John Sharp, Diary, 19 August 1945.
- 19 John Sharp, Diary, 19 August 1945.
- 20 From poster in the possession of Richard Brown, son of B. W. Brown.
- 21 Chalker, Letter, 3 March 2000.
- 22 Chalker, Letter, 3 March 2000.
- 23 Durnford, 189.
- 24 Durnford, 189–190.
- 25 Anckorn, Interview, 77–78; van Holthe's poster "Out of the Blue Came . . ."
- 26 Smiley, E-mail, 30 March 2004.
- 27 Martin, Letter, n.d.
- 28 Pritchard, "It's Grand to See You Again," *London FEPOW Magazine*, n.d.
- 29 Compilation from Anckorn, Interview, 48–49, 63–64; supplemental information, E-mail, 16 June 2010.
- 30 Anckorn, E-mail, 16 June 2010.
- 31 Compiled from Pritchard, Interview, 27.
- 32 Boggett, "Notes on the Thai-Burma railway; Part IX: The Kra Isthmus Railway," 41.
- 33 Boggett, "Notes on the Thai-Burma railway; Part IX: The Kra Isthmus Railway," 41.
- 34 Gibson, Letter, 23 April 2004.
- 35 Gibson, Unpublished diary, n.p.
- 36 Gibson, Unpublished diary, n.p.
- 37 John Sharp, Diary, 20 August 1945.
- 38 John Sharp, Diary, 20 August 1945.
- 39 John Sharp, Diary, 21 August 1945.
- 40 John Sharp, Diary, 21 August 1945.
- 41 John Sharp, Diary, 21 August 1945; Whittaker, Letter, 23 April 2006.
- 42 John Sharp, Diary, 24 August 1945.
- 43 John Sharp, Diary, 23, 24, 25 August 1945.
- 44 Allison, *Begone Dull Care*, 104.
- 45 Pritchard, Handwritten note, n.d.
- 46 Note on van Holthe poster, "Out of the Blue Came . . ."
- 47 Coast, 240.
- 48 Coast, 240.
- 49 Coast, 241, 242.
- 50 Coast, 244.
- 51 Allison, *Begone Dull Care*, 104–105.
- 52 Jacobs, 169.
- 53 Jacobs, 169.
- 54 IWM 9165 Misc 116 (1934).
- 55 Pritchard, "the undefeated . . .," 2.
- 56 Kan, Diary, 25 September 1945.
- 57 Kan, Dairy, 9 October 1945; trans. by Margie Bellamy.
- 58 Bloemhard, trans. by Margie Bellamy.
- 59 Kan, Diary, 18–28 October 1945; trans. by Margie Bellamy.
- 60 Bloemhard, trans. by Margie Bellamy.
- 61 Bloemhard, trans. by Margie Bellamy.
- 62 Kan, Diary, 8 November 1945.
- 63 Julsing, n.p.

- 64 Bloemhard, trans. by Margie Bellamy.
65 Tom Boardman, Letter, 15 May 2006.
66 Pritchard, Interview, 15.
67 Walker, *Of Rice and Men*, 78.

Chapter 12: “Jolly Good Show!”

Theatrical Production Overview

“In a large collection of people as we were there were men of every conceivable trade and skill,” wrote Jack Chalker about those in the camp who were essential to the theatrical enterprise, “carpenters, tinsmiths, instrument-makers, tailors, designers, artists, actors, musicians, hatters, forgers, cat-burglars, safe-breakers, paper-makers, writers—everything one could think of, and this was very much to our advantage.”¹ Some of these men became members of the design, technical, and support crews.

The astonishing array of theatrical elements that the POW designers and technicians were able to provide for the shows greatly enhanced the experience for their audiences. “The improvisation for décor and dresses had to be seen to be believed,” wrote a dumbfounded Captain Aylwin. “With only coconut oil lamps, lighting effects were produced to rival any provincial and perhaps even London theatre and the coloured dresses made from mosquito nets and rice sacks were amazing.”² Aylwin was writing about his experience of the theatre at Chungkai in early 1944; as we’ve seen in the preceding chapters, there was more amazement to come. If the shows the POWs saw in these theatres surprised and delighted—and they did—it was due as much to the imagination and ingenuity of the design and technical personnel as it was to the producers and performers.

The POW Theatre Production Handbookⁱ

Part One:

- A. The POW Theatres.
- B. Scenery.
- C. Set Pieces and Properties.
- D. Staging: Two Exceptional Productions.

Part Two:

- E. Lighting.
- F. Costumes.
- G. Musical Instrument Construction.

Note: locations within visual artifacts will be given from the point of view of the audience-reader.

Part One: Theatres, Scenery, Props, Staging

A. The POW Theatres

Theatre Construction

There is a sizable visual and verbal record of most, if not all, of the proscenium theatres in the base hospital and relocation camps in Thailand. All were built along similar lines, following the model of the European proscenium theatre that had become the standard architectural configuration for performance venues featuring Western theatrical styles.

ⁱ My appreciation to Tom Barrett, Technical Director of the Macalester College Theatre and Dance Department, for vetting Sections A-E, and G; and to Lynn Farrington, Costumer for the department, for her expertise in identifying the special features of the costumes in Part F.

The Site. The POW proscenium theatres were freestanding structures, usually built in a level open area next to the camp's parade ground, the gathering place for the whole camp. Since audiences sat on flat ground, *sightlines*—the ability of each audience member to see the stage clearly—were a problem. The stage, therefore, had to be raised high enough so that spectators at the back could see over the heads of those in front of them.

The sites for the theatres in Chungkai and Tamuang were different. They were located at the bottom of a slope, which formed a natural amphitheatre and allowed all audience members an unobstructed view of the stage. Unlike the theatres on the edge of the bare parade ground, these two had a backdrop of trees and other leafy vegetation, which in Jack Chalker's eyes (writing about the theatre at Chungkai), only enhanced the aesthetic experience of attending the theatre:

Bordering directly onto the eastern edge of the river Kwai (partly occupied now by the present cemetery area) was a natural auditorium of gently rising ground which provided an exceptionally convenient and extremely beautiful setting for a stage facing the rising ground. . . . The setting, looking westwards over some thinned-out jungle vegetation and palmyra across to the hills on the far side of the river, was exquisite, especially on a brilliant moonlight night. A little to the right up-river was a massive “sugar-loaf” rock rising from the distant jungle hundreds of feet, partly covered with sub-tropical rain forest vegetation.³



FIGURE 12.1. WATERCOLOR OF THE CHUNGKAI THEATRE. COURTESY OF JACK CHALKER.

The striking “sugar-loaf” formation is seen in the background of Chalker's watercolor.

Foundation. Whether situated on the flat ground or at the bottom of a slope, the *stagehouse*—the structure in which the performances took place—sat on a raised rectangular foundation of built-up and

packed-down earth. Norman Pritchard explained that “tons and tons of earth were moved by hand (no vehicles!) to make a platform.”⁴ (Excavating and carrying dirt to build huge earthen mounds was not a new task for many of these POWs.) A large boxlike framework of bamboo was constructed, and the earth was deposited inside. Bamboo matting was attached to the interior to create a retaining wall. The exterior of this platform framework is best seen in one of the Kanburi theatre photographs.

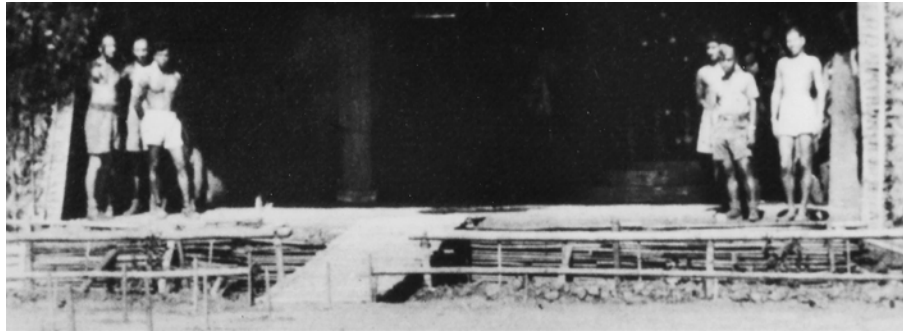


FIGURE 12.2. KANBURI OFFICERS' CAMP THEATRE. PHOTOGRAPH DETAIL. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL.

Here again, Chungkai, because of its location, was different. The major portion of the earth for the raised platform stage did not have to be excavated and carted laboriously into place but already existed as one side of a “small shallow valley.”⁵ The earth from the excavation of the orchestra pit, as well as from the terracing of the opposite slope into an amphitheatre, provided fill so the stage could be properly sized, shaped, and leveled. Otherwise, the foundation was similar to those seen elsewhere. Chalker estimated the height of the foundation at Chungkai to be “about a metre and a half [4.9 feet].”⁶

Stagehouse. The bamboo and atap construction techniques used to build the stagehouse followed the same basic truss construction employed by the POWs in their pitched-roof sleeping huts and other camp structures. “No nails were used,” wrote Donald Smith, “as the prisoners soon learned the trick of fitting pieces of bamboo together like a jigsaw puzzle, and of lashing the rafter-beams with long strips of wet, tough tree-fibre.”⁷

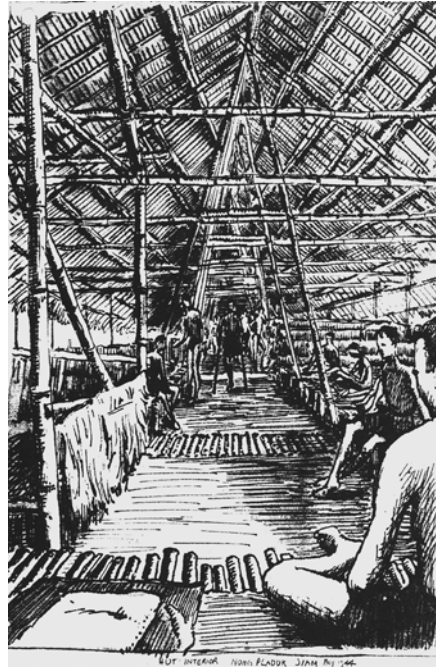


FIGURE 12.3 HUT INTERIOR AT NONG PLADUK. WILLIAM WILDER. COURTESY OF ANTHONY WILDER.

William Wilder's sketch of the interior of one of these bamboo and atap huts at Nong Pladuk provides a clear view of what the theatre's internal structure may have looked like. POW construction engineers, guided by someone with an intimate understanding of the architecture of proscenium theatres back home, were able to extend and modify this truss construction technology to build the stagehouses—oblong “boxes,” actually—enclosed on three sides. We have the exact dimensions of only one POW playhouse: the new theatre at Nong Pladuk. Its dimensions were given as: “Height 22’, Width 32’, Length 40’.”ⁱⁱ

Proscenium Arch. On the short side facing the audience was the proscenium arch, which created a framing device for the stage action. The side walls of this arch were constructed of plaited bamboo matting attached to large rectangular frames, or *flats*. Flats are normally wooden frames, strengthened by crosspieces and corner braces, with some sort of material stretched tightly over them. Since wood was available only in small quantities, the ubiquitous bamboo was used instead.

ⁱⁱ This information appear on the back of Wilder's sketch.



FIGURES 12.4. TAMARKAN THEATRE DETAIL, RAE NIXON. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL. COURTESY OF MRS. RAE NIXON.

FIGURE 12.5. KANBURI THEATRE DETAIL. PHOTOGRAPH. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL. COURTESY OF MRS. RAE NIXON.

FIGURE 12.6. CHUNGKAI THEATRE DETAIL. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF MARTIN PERCIVAL.

Each of the theatres in the Kanburi area had distinctive designs on the side walls of their proscenium arch that were not only aesthetically pleasing but also served to hold the bamboo matting in place: at Tamarkan, the central top squares of matting were turned sideways to create a diamond design; at Kanburi Officers' Camp, slender rods of bamboo were grouped together at the bottom of the wall partway from the proscenium opening and then spread out in a fan shape; and at Chungkai, shaggy atap thatch was attached by horizontal pieces of bamboo to keep out the rain.

By the time the *Wonder Bar* photographs were taken, a small rectangle of bamboo displaying the Chungkai theatre logo—an entwined “T” and “C” superimposed over masks of Comedy and Tragedy—decorated either side of the proscenium.



FIGURE 12.7. CHUNGKAI THEATRE LOGO BY HUIB VAN LAAR. IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

One of these logos can be seen at the left in the Chungkai theatre photograph (**Figure 12.6**). When the theatre was rebuilt in another part of the camp in November 1944, the logos were replaced by large paintings of “nude beauties” (see **Figure 6.45** and **Figure 6.46**)⁸ and a newly designed logo was placed at the apex of the header over the proscenium arch.⁹

John Coast estimated the height of the Chungkai theatre’s proscenium opening (from the stage to the bottom of the header) was “about eight feet six inches.”¹⁰

At Tamarkan, the header served as a marquee advertising the current, or coming, attraction (see **Figure 12.4**). The header for the theatre in the Kanburi Officers’ Camp was a huge façade, the roof line behind it sloping quickly down from the ridgepole to the top of the side walls. At the apex, the stylized “Playhouse Presents” logo provided an additional signature for this theatre.

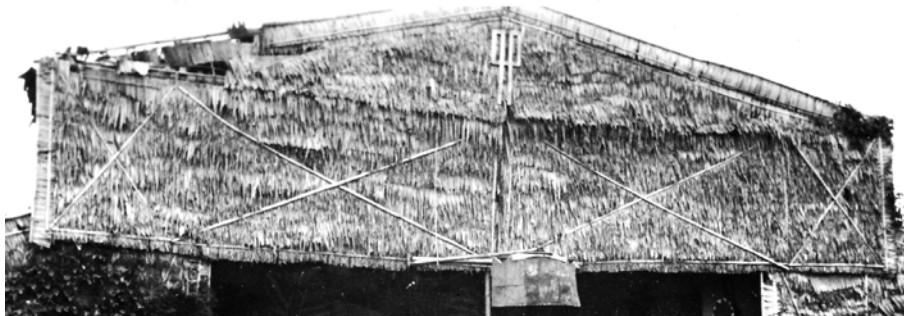


FIGURE 12.8. FAÇADE OF KANBURI OFFICERS’ CAMP THEATRE. PHOTOGRAPH DETAIL. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL.

Roof. All of the proscenium theatres in Thailand eventually had pitched roofs covered with atap thatch like the men's huts. The roofs not only kept the performers dry during the annual monsoon seasons but the paint on the sets from running and the packed-earth stage floors from turning into mud. For most proscenium theatres, the pitched roof ended at the outer edges of the arch, but the roofs of the Nong Pladuk, Nakhon Pathom, and last Chungkai theatres extended beyond the outer edges, covering offstage spaces.

The Stage and Its Appointments

Apron. The performance area in front of a proscenium arch is called the *apron*. In a theatre lit by natural light, the apron would be the major performance area. But when artificial lighting was approved, the value of the apron diminished as the entertainers moved upstage of the proscenium arch.

Playing Area. Nearly all the proscenium theatre stages in Thailand had hard-packed dirt floors. The exception was at Tamarkan, which had a floor made of wooden planks.¹¹ Where these planks came from is not known; it's possible they were left over from the construction of the wooden bridge or the molds for the concrete pilings of the steel bridge. Coast believed that the dimension of the playing area in the Chungkai theatre were "about 24 feet front [wide] and 18 feet sides [deep]."¹² A note on the back of Wilder's sketch of the new Nong Pladuk theatre states the stage width was "20' long X 22' [deep]."

Wings. The theatrical term *wings* can be ambiguous, referring either to the spaces on the sides of the stage out of the audience's sight or to architectural features of the stage's internal structure. Most of the POW stagehouses contained multiple sets of permanent wings: rectangular frames covered with matting set out at an angle some distance from the side walls (allowing for passage behind) and projecting into the playing area. They not only created an inner frame for the action and hid any offstage activity occurring "in the wings" behind them but also allowed for multiple entrance points. A detail from one of the Kanburi photographs gives a good view of these wings on the audience right side of the stage.



FIGURE 12.9. KANBURI OFFICERS CAMP THEATRE.
PHOTOGRAPH DETAIL. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL.

In comparison, the wings on the Chungkai stage were constructed differently, not fixed in one position, but flexible. Mounted on central vertical pivot points, they could be placed in “open” or “closed” positions and even reversed to reveal a new setting.¹³

Back Wall. The back wall of a stage defines the upstage limits of the playing area and also functions as masking for a *crossover*: a space behind that allowed actors to move quickly from one side of the stage to the other without being seen.

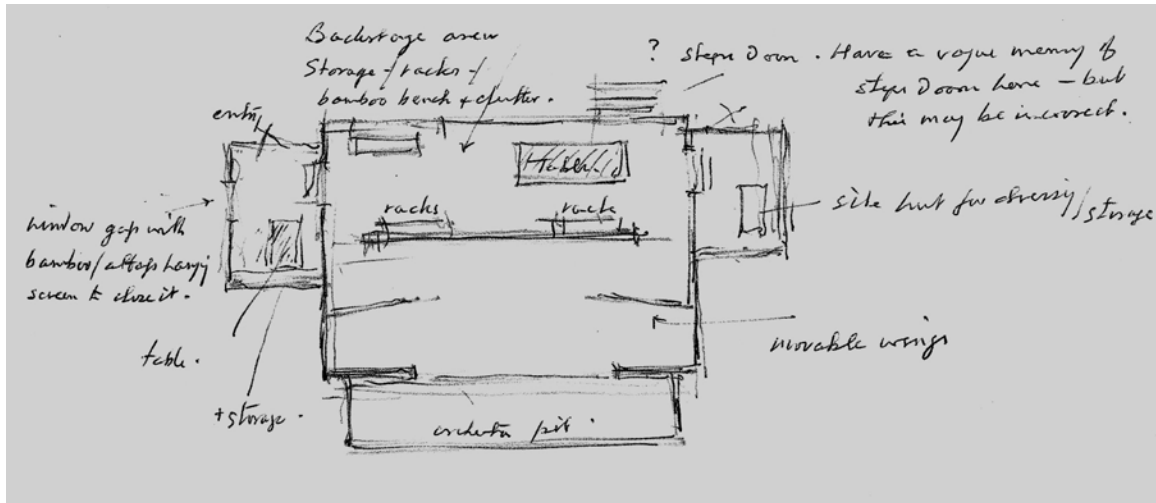


FIGURE 12.10. GROUND PLAN OF CHUNGKAI THEATRE. COURTESY OF JACK CHALKER.

This sketch of the Chungkai theatre’s interior layout drawn by Jack Chalker confirms the location of the back wall, which he called the “main bamboo screening,” and the crossover behind it, allowing entrances to be made upstage from either side.¹⁴ Since the backstage area at Chungkai was on the same level as the stage, such a crossover was possible. For the other Thailand theatres, the stage and the dressing room were on different levels, making such transit difficult, if not impossible. Instead, a backdrop had to be *dead hung*ⁱⁱⁱ some feet downstage of the back wall to allow for crossovers. The back wall itself could be painted and used as a *cyclorama* (“cyc”) to function as part of a setting, usually representing the sky.

Fly Gallery. Besides protecting against rain, another benefit of the pitched roof was to create a *fly gallery*—the space above the stage not usually visible to an audience, commonly referred to as *the flies*. From a fly gallery, backdrops or small scenery pieces can be *flown* (raised and lowered) on battens hung from a wooden grid over the stage.

ⁱⁱⁱ Dead hung is a theatrical term for hanging a drop or curtain from a batten that could not be raised or lowered during the show.

Grid. The typical grid in these POW theatres was composed of “six stout bamboo poles.”¹⁵ The three poles running from front to back acted as supports for the stagehouse structure; the three poles parallel to the proscenium arch not only supported the side walls but functioned as battens from which scenery and/or lighting could be hung.

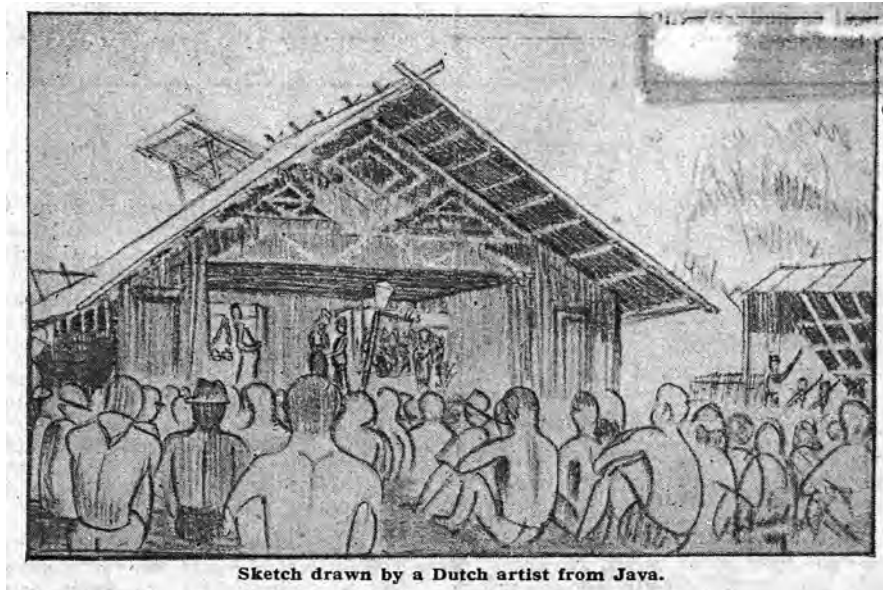


FIGURE 12.11. SKETCH OF NAKHON PATHOM. ARTIST UNKNOWN.

Flying scenery in and out requires a *counter-weight* system with a *pin rail* where the ropes attached to the scenery can be *tied off* (secured). It is traditionally located in the wings offstage to the right. Except for Nakhon Pathom,^{iv} Ubon, and the last theatre at Chungkai, none of the fly galleries in these POW theatres was actually high enough to handle full scenery being flown in and out; therefore, backdrops had to be either dead hung or rigged as roll drops. A *roll drop* is a backdrop that can be rolled up and down on a cylinder controlled by ropes and pulleys from offstage. In Section D, below, we will see how the ability to use dead hung and roll drops greatly facilitated the changeover from one scene to the next in *Memories of the Gay 90s*.

Front Curtains. Proscenium theatres require front curtains to hide the setting and any actors in place on stage before the show starts. Front curtains are usually hung from a pipe that sits along the upstage side of the proscenium arch and are rigged as a *draw curtain* to be pulled from the center to the sides or raised above the lower edge of the header. In POW theatres draw-type front curtains were normally made from rice sacks or tent canvas stitched together, as seen in Ubon (see **Figure 12.14** below).

^{iv} The theatre constructed there in 1945.

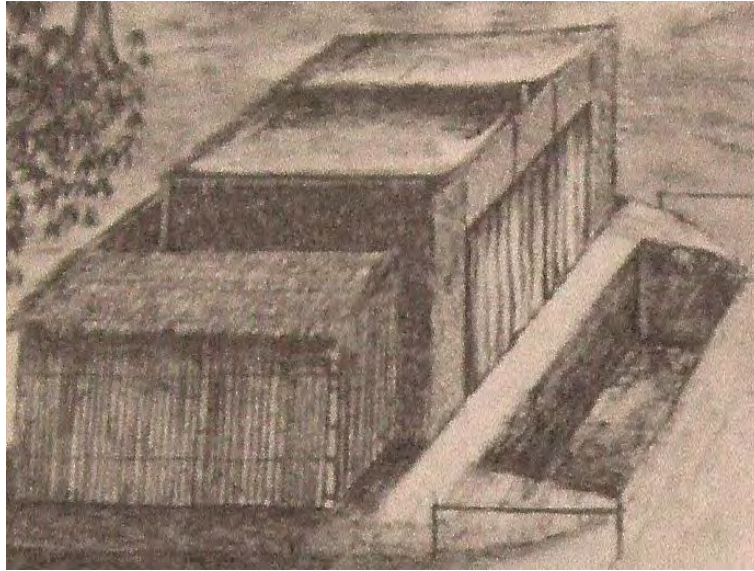


FIGURE 12.12. SKETCH OF CHUNGKAI THEATRE DETAIL, PHILIP MENINSKY. IWM ART LD6529.

In Philip Meninsky's sketch of the Chungkai theatre, a draw-type front curtain is shown in place and closed. When "the curtain fell down when they attempted to draw it," during *Shooting Stars* (an occasion for barracking laughter and loud applause from the audience), they experimented with a different type of front curtain.¹⁶

This new curtain, John Durnford notes, was made of mosquito netting "stitched together and weighted to fall straight."¹⁷ Remarking on his watercolor of the Chungkai theatre (**Figure 12.1**), Chalker wrote, "I seem to have indicated a rolled front curtain in the sketch. I know this was attempted but I can't remember it being used."¹⁸ The bamboo roller for this curtain is seen in the *Wonder Bar* photographs (**see Figure 6.25**) and was used for that show and others after Chalker left the camp.

When lit from the front by daylight or stage lighting, the mosquito netting would be opaque like a scrim curtain. When lit from the back, a scrim becomes transparent. The transformation from one to the other is magical, as Custance Baker acknowledges in his description of the opening moment of *The Christmas Spirit*: "The gauze curtain was raised just like a pantomime transformation scene and disclosed a group of choristers in white surplices lit up by our two tilly lamps and little oil lamps disguised as candles."¹⁹ At Chungkai, at least, any mention of the curtain "going up" is not just metaphorical.

In Tamarkan, Nakhon Pathom, Kanburi Officers' Camp, and perhaps Nong Pladuk as well, an alternative solution was devised for their front curtains. Instead of fabric—much more valuable for use as costumes or roll drops—the stage technicians utilized woven bamboo or grass mats.



FIGURE 12.13. NAKHON PATHOM THEATRE. WATERCOLOR. COURTESY OF JACK CHALKER.

At Nakhon Pathom, three large sections of “bamboo sleeping mats tied together” were suspended by tabs from two long parallel bamboo poles. When they were pulled back into the wings, the center section would nest in front of one of the other sections.²⁰ At Kanburi Officers’ Camp, the “pair of huge bamboo screens” functioning as front curtains were manipulated differently: “The idea was for a stage hand to stand behind each half,” Carter observed. “When the curtain ‘rose,’ each man would clutch his half of the screen and lug it into the wings, when the curtain ‘fell’ the men would sprint on stage again, bringing the screens together.”²¹

Unique Ubon

The theatre at Ubon Aerodrome Camp had several unique architectural features that suggest someone involved in its design may have had knowledge of pre-nineteenth-century theatre architecture.

According to Norman Pritchard, the stage was “3 feet high at the front and about 4 feet high at the back.”²² A stage that is higher at the back than the front is called a *raked stage*. (This architectural feature was first used in the Italian Renaissance theatres.) Custance Baker learned about the reason for this raking from Leo Britt: “Stages, Chungkai included, are built on a slight forward slope so that the audience in the pit or the stalls can see the whole of the stage surface. The back is ‘up stage’ and the front by the foot lights is ‘down stage.’”²³



FIGURE 12.14. UBON THEATRE. PHOTOGRAPH. COURTESY OF NORMAN PRITCHARD.

This photograph of the Ubon theatre taken after liberation shows that the side walls of the proscenium arch are angled back and shorter on their upstage sides than on their downstage sides. The header angled in and down is also narrower on its upstage side. Where the side walls and header join upstage, they form a smaller inner proscenium. In each side wall is a doorway giving easy access to the front of the stage. This structural feature is reminiscent of some eighteenth-century British theatres.

Two large *flats* extended out on either side of the proscenium arch to prevent audiences from seeing performers making their entrances and exits. There was no orchestra pit at Ubon.

Support Spaces

All theatres need support spaces for dressing rooms, workrooms, rehearsal rooms, and offices. Meninsky's sketch (see **Figure 12.12**) shows one of the two small shed-like extensions that sat on opposite sides of the Chungkai theatre stagehouse. In notes accompanying his ground plan (**Figure 12.10**), Chalker explained, "On each side and set back from the front, extensions were made linked through to the stage and with an outside entrance to them as well. Each had a sloping roof linked in to the side of the main structure. My bumbling memory is that these two side extensions had their bases at ground level and that we had steps up inside to give access to the main theatre area."²⁴ One of these side extensions was used as the makeup room; the other as the wardrobe/dressing room.²⁵ Each side extension also had window openings, *atap* flaps that could be propped open for light and ventilation.

Backstage Areas. As already noted, the backstage area at Chungkai was on the same level as the stage. Its primary purpose was to serve as a workroom, as it contained "a bamboo table back-stage on which costumes and props were made."²⁶ During the run of a show, this table and others in the extensions could also serve as locations for the actors' hand props. But there was another internal division of the backstage area as well: an office for the theatre committee.²⁷

Since the backstage areas at Tamarkan were on a ground level, the interior layout was a bit

different. Besides his sketch of the front view of the Tamarkan theatre, Rae Nixon also sketched a rear view as well.



FIGURE 12.15. BACK VIEW OF THE TAMARKAN THEATRE. RAE NIXON. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL. COURTESY OF MRS. RAE NIXON.

Visible in this sketch are the same shed-like extensions on either side of the stagehouse as at Chungkai; the one on the audience's left served as "the wardrobe annexe."²⁸

Attached to the back of the stagehouse but sitting at a lower level is a large shed-like construction, accessed by "three steps at the back of the stage [which led down] to the artists' dressing room, with a table and three mirrors."²⁹ A sketch by Dutch artist Flip Relf shows the interior of this dressing room in use prior to a show.³⁰



FIGURE 12.16. BACKSTAGE DRESSING ROOM IN THE TAMARKAN THEATRE. SKETCH. FLIP RELF. COURTESY OF RHYLL RIVETT.

This backstage view shows actors getting ready for a performance. In the background are the steps leading from the dressing room directly up to the stage.

Nixon's back view of the Tamarkan theatre also shows a separate, open-sided, gable-roofed building, which may have been used for building props.

Rehearsal Spaces. Most POW producer-directors found some quiet corner of the camp that could serve as a rehearsal space. Chungkai actually had two designated rehearsal spaces.

The "Bamboo Rehearsal Theatre" was situated in a clearing in a grove of slender arching bamboo near the theatre. When Norman Carter was shown the space by Captain Charles Faulder, he thought it resembled a cathedral: "Faulder said: 'It took a long time to make this clearing and we had to do it quietly because we didn't want to frighten the squirrels away. It's a lovely spot, cool and quiet, the sun never pierces the fronds.'" ³¹

The "Slaughter House Rehearsal Theatre," used by the Chungkai orchestra, was so named because "in this clearing the butchers had formerly performed the gruesome task of killing the camps' meat with a sledgehammer." ³²

Orchestra Pit. Each proscenium theatre normally had an orchestra pit. Tamarkan and Nong Pladuk had shallow semicircular pits bounded on the audience side by raised earth requiring the conductor be seated so he would not block the audience's view. But at Kanburi and Chungkai the orchestra pits were deep enough to allow the conductor's head to be just above the stage level. These pits were separated from the audience by a railing made of bamboo (see the Kanburi theatre, **Figure 12.2**). For some shows, it appears, the railing was covered with matting to create a *masking panel* which shielded the audience's eyes from the glare of pit lights used by the musicians and helped focus their attention on the stage.

At Nakhon Pathom, the orchestra was located at audience right under a separate lean-to construction (see **Figure 8.9**). This solution worked well, especially for the performances of plays where the orchestra's role was solely to provide incidental and/or *entr'acte* music. For band concerts and variety shows, the musicians would be on stage.

Audience and Front of House Areas

But the term *theatre* suggests more than just the stagehouse and its support facilities. It also implies the seating area(s) as well as the *front of house* box office.

Seating. As has already been mentioned, because these theatres had to accommodate large numbers of audience members, they were usually built next to the parade ground so the troops could use the cleared level ground for their seating area. The dimensions of the seating area within the bamboo railings for the new theatre at Nong Pladuk were: "Auditorium 30' front widening to 60' back." ^v

^v Information on the reverse of Wilder's sketch.



FIGURE 12.17. NEW NONG PLADUK THEATRE. WILLIAM WILDER. COURTESY OF EVE ALLUM AND ANTHONY WILDER.

At Chungkai and Tamuang the seating areas were amphitheatres carved out of sloping banks. The estimates of the seating capacity at Chungkai differ dependent upon which theatre you are talking about. The early theatre seen in Chalker's watercolor (**Figure 12.1**) appears to have accommodated at least 2,000 men.³³ Coast, who was intimately involved in this theatre as a stage manager and producer, wrote that "5,000 people sometimes saw a show" in it.³⁴ But he must have been counting not only the "standing room only" areas at the back and sides but total audience attendance for a two-night run.

The later Chungkai amphitheatre, best seen in Fielding pen and ink sketch (see **Figure 6.39**), seated 3,000 audience members.³⁵ Norman Carter avowed that amphitheatre seating had distinct advantages over parade ground seating: "The results were a large semicircle comprising gallery, pit, dress circle and stalls. The terraces were just deep enough to allow one's feet to rest comfortable on the ground and wide enough to prevent the man below from resting his back against your shins, or his backside on your feet."³⁶ Each of the different levels and sections of seating were marked off by low bamboo railings. As far as is known, only Chungkai used ushers stationed at various entry points to help audience members find their seats.

Box Office. Even if 5,000 POWs could manage to see a show during its short run, it was still impossible in these vastly overcrowded camps for everyone to attend a performance at the same time.^{vi} Booking seats in most of POW camp theatres in Thailand, was not by reserving them at a box office, but by placing an article of clothing on the ground in front of the theatre where you wanted to sit. As Tom Morris explained: "It would [be] coats, clogs, and Dixies [mess kits], and whatever marking the spot for somebody."³⁷

When this procedure proved unworkable at Chungkai—there were just too many men in the camp and too few performances of any one show—a box office with reserved seating available for a fee was

^{vi} The standard policy was for each military unit to be notified as to when it might attend a production. This policy did not seem to apply in the hospital and relocation camps.

initiated. In this way POWs could be assured of getting a seat for a particular show and not have to stand at the back and/or sides or miss the show entirely. Arthur Johnston described how the reserved seating system worked:

Reserved seats comprised a large area to the left side of the centre aisle extending from the top of the bank almost to the orchestra pit, and held for officers at 10c, portions of the adjoining right hand side also being held for their use. Remainder right hand side for O/R at 5c per seat. Also a reserved area [at the front] for unfits (wheelchairs and anything available) and Japs on left hand side.³⁸

Officers, who received higher monthly wages than the other ranks, were clearly favored by this reserved seating policy. And since seating for other ranks was limited, most were forced to stand at the back or sides. Charging fees for reserved seats provided much needed income to fund future entertainment, to everyone's benefit. The first tickets issued at Chungkai were stamped round metal disks. Later they were paper and, like those back home, color coded to indicate performance date, seating area, row, and seat number.

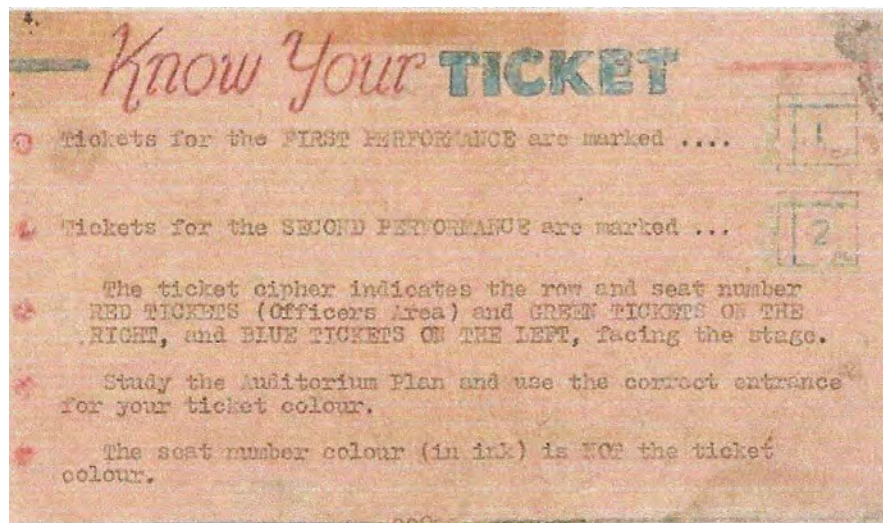


FIGURE 12.18. "KNOW YOUR TICKET" SIGN. CHUNGKAI. IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

None of the other POW theatres in Thailand, as far as is known, established either a box office or a reserved-seating-for-a-fee policy.

B. Scenery

The POWs were continually surprised and delighted by the scenic abilities of their set designers and stage technicians and never failed to show their appreciation for the ingenuity and artistry on display. After attending a pantomime production of *Cinderella*, Basil Peacock wrote, "The scenic effect was so

good and ingenious that no one laughed, and all applauded such stage-craft.”³⁹ Jacobs had noted similar reactions to Frank Brydges’ scenic creations at Tamarkan: “when the curtain went up there was invariably a round of applause for the setting, because the audience fully realized the difficulties under which we were working.”⁴⁰ Brydges had a good sense of design: before the war he had been “a compositor for the Sydney Herald.”⁴¹

We know the names of a few other gifted set designers:

At Chungkai: David Ffokes, Huib van Laar, Te Tovey, Jack Chalker, and Rob Brazil (as a team), and later Frank Brydges.

At Nong Pladuk: “Tich” Harrison, Norman Pritchard, Jan van Holthe.

At Nakhon Pathom: Rob Brazil, Fred “Smudger” Smith.

At Kanburi Officers’ Camp: Fred “Smudger” Smith.

At Ubon: Jan van Holthe and Norman Pritchard (as a team).

Scenic Materials

Flats. Like the construction of the proscenium theatres mentioned previously, scenery was made from an assortment of different-sized *flats*. Woven matting of split bamboo was primarily used to cover these frames, but it wasn’t the only material so employed.⁴² Large sheets of woven grass used by the Japanese “for partitioning their living quarters” were also used.⁴³

Curtains and Backdrops. Vegetable and rice sacks, old tent canvas, woven bamboo matting, and sometimes even stitched-together mosquito netting were used for front curtains. Backdrops (British, *back-cloths*) that were to be rolled up and down had to be made from pliable material like rice sacks, tent canvas or mosquito netting; backdrops to be dead hung could be of stiff woven matting.

Paint. Finding the materials from which to fashion different-colored paint called for much ingenuity. Back at Aunganaung, Burma, in 1943, Frank Brydges had created pigments by crushing various colored stones found in the jungle. In the hospital and relocation camps, POW artists, chemists, and stage technicians had time to experiment with a variety of possibilities. For Jack Chalker, happenstance also played a role in this process: “We had dug large pits in the dry season to form large ponds from the monsoon rains which lasted for a bit into the next dry season. In [Nakhon Pathom]^{vii} we found below the brown mud level, some five or six feet down, a thin band of fairly bright yellow earth with some very black stuff below it. We collected some of each, dried it and pounded it to a powder.”⁴⁴

The following list of dry pigment colors has been created by collating various reports on what colors were derived from what sources and used as paint for sets and props—and even costumes.

White	quicklime, whitewash, bamboo ash, chalk
Black	soot from cooking pots, charcoal, mud
Red	ink (stolen from the Japanese administrator’s office), brick dust, mercurochrome, food coloring
Yellow	curry powder, turmeric, food coloring, clay
Blue	ink, indigo
Brown	boiled bark, mud
Green	plants, cow manure boiled in water ⁴⁵

Of the last, Philip Brugman reported, “The color was beautiful, but we couldn’t get rid of the

^{vii} Chalker writes “Chungkai” here, but I believe he misremembered the location. All the examples he gives of how this clay was used are from Nakhon Pathom. Also, at Chungkai there was no need to dig holding tanks for water as it bordered two rivers. Nakhon Pathom hospital camp, on the other hand, was not near an immediate source of water.

stench.”⁴⁶

At Tamarkan, the Japanese commandant permitted the POWs to purchase ink in various colors from the nearby town of Kanchanaburi—but only through a Japanese go-between, so they could make a good profit for themselves.⁴⁷

Lighter shades of paint could be made by mixing in white pigment; darker shades by mixing in black. Various pigments could be combined to create other palette colors. The amount of water added to the pigment determined its intensity: less water created a more saturated color; more water created a thin wash.

Tapioca, grown in the camp as part of the meager food supplies, provided the necessary sizing. “The root was boiled up in an old gula malacca [cane sweetener] tin,” Chalker recalled, “and the gelatinous result provided an adhesive which would, when mixed with colouring, adhere to bamboo matting and cloth.”⁴⁸ If the painted sets were for an open-air theatre, such as the early structures at Chungkai and Nakhon Pathom, their durability was not guaranteed: “If it rained,” Brazil wrote, “[the setting] had to be painted again.”⁴⁹

Brushes. With old shaving brushes and anything else they could devise, gifted scenic artists worked wonders. Carter called Brydges’ backdrop of the Yellow Brick Road for *The Wizard of Oz* “a triumph of shaving-brush artistry.”⁵⁰ For the more detailed work, old toothbrushes were employed.⁵¹

Set Designs

There are very few verbal accounts or visual images of the POW scene designers at work or descriptions of the settings they created. One account we do have is from Arthur Johnston, who described the stylish 1930s Art Deco–inspired setting for Eric Cliffe’s *Promenade Concert* at Chungkai.

Stage all in white (most probably white chalked or limed) with the effect of a promenade obtained by having 3 arches at back of stage, and on the two supports, two lamps of modernistic design supposed to be set in, something after this style:—

On the right side wall a surrealist drawing of a piano gave a finishing touch to what would otherwise have been just a bare white wall. Done with charcoal with white chalk for the keyboard and light and shade effects.⁵²

The white and black design was extended to the furniture and costumes for the musicians as well: “The orchestra stands were also done in white and the whole orchestra and conductor wore white shirts (of a type) although the rest of their dress, as can be imagined, was extremely varied.”⁵³ “Excellent set. Very striking and effective especially in lamplight,” wrote Richardson.⁵⁴

Norman Carter described a scenic artist at work in Chungkai preparing a backdrop for the production of *Outward Bound*: “Somebody had scrounged lengths of old canvas, sewn them together and then hung the finished ‘cloth’ on to bamboo poles. A scenic artist was outlining in charcoal the back wall of a ship’s bar, with a doorway cut dead centre, through which could be seen the white ship’s rails.”⁵⁵

And when Jacobs saw *Cinderella* he was also suitably impressed with the scenery: “The painting of the ballroom scene was a miracle of achievement by a Dutch artist, who had the most meager materials at his disposal. On a plane [*sic*] grass mat utilized as a backcloth, using lime wash, ink, tumeric [*sic*] and

cow manure, the artist had painted a scene which for balance and color and perspective would have been difficult to surpass.”⁵⁶



FIGURE 12.19. KANBURI OFFICERS' CAMP THEATRE. PHOTOGRAPH DETAIL. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL.

This photograph taken after liberation at Kanburi Officers' Camp is the only known visual artifact showing POW scenic artists at work. At center three prisoners in their G-string “Jap Happies” are painting a giant map of Europe and the Mediterranean to be flown in during their “Victory Show” as others look on. Set designer Fred “Smudger” Smith stands at left center. Upstage is a backdrop decorated with the flags of Australia, Great Britain, the United States, and the Netherlands. The side wings are painted with appropriate bunting, rosettes, and other victory symbols as well.

Renderings and Thumbnail Sketches

Set Renderings. The best examples we have of POW scenic designs are Robert Brazil's rendering for *Greenwood Fantasy* at Nakhon Pathom, Norman Pritchard's of a set for *Escapado Argentino* at Nong Pladuk, and Pritchard and Jan van Holthe's renderings for a series of revues at Ubon.



FIGURE 12.20. SET RENDERING FOR GREENWOOD FANTASY.

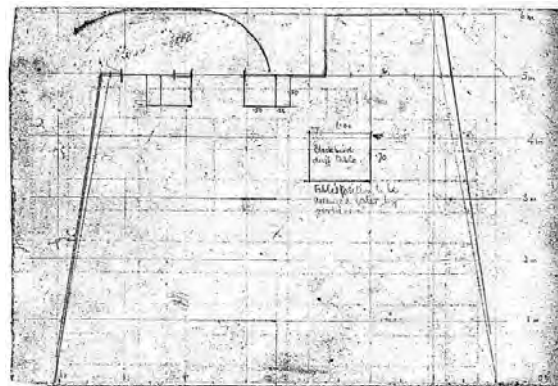


FIGURE 12.21. GROUND PLAN FOR GREENWOOD FANTASY. BOTH COURTESY OF ROBERT BRAZIL.

Brazil's set design for the musical comedy *Greenwood Fantasy* is a *unit set*, which means that

all the action takes place in this same basic structure, although the locale might change from interior to exterior by a change of set dressing and set pieces. Commenting on his set design for the open-air theatre, Brazil said, “If you look at the set and the [ground plan], there is an entrance middle left, with a window. On the right there is a high window, and below it, and in front of it, a section of ‘wooden paneling.’ This is where The Sheriff would stand, with his ladies. The floor behind there was raised eighteen inches, to convey the importance of the characters there.”⁵⁷

His ground plan indicates a table at the right, “position to be arranged later by production.” The only entrance shown is from the back by walking up an earthen ramp, although performers must have been able to enter downstage of the side walls as well.

Both van Holthe and Pritchard were involved in designing shows at Nong Pladuk. None of van Holthe’s set designs have survived, but Pritchard’s for the cantina scene in *Escapado Argentino* has.

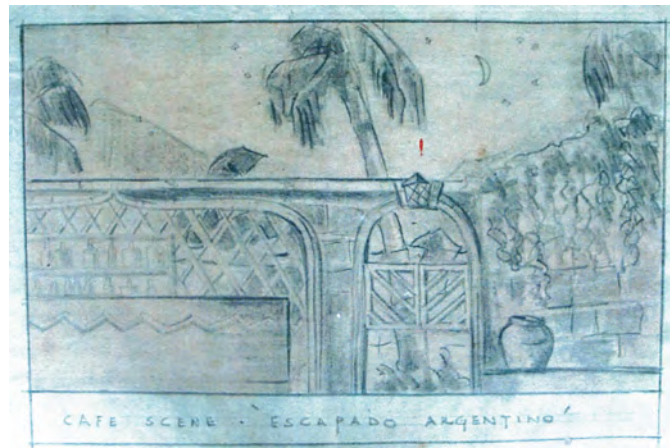


FIGURE 12.22. SET DESIGN FOR CAFÉ SCENE. COURTESY OF NORMAN PRITCHARD.

His design shows a half wall with an arched doorway and swinging doors sitting downstage of a backdrop painted with mountains and what appear to be tall, freestanding palm trees. A café light is positioned over the doorway. Left of it is a bar with a liquor cabinet behind. Back of the cabinet is the wall made of bamboo latticework so the audience can see through it to any action upstage. At right is a flat painted to look like a solid stone wall festooned with vines and a large earthen jar. In the background is a backdrop painted with palm trees and mountains.

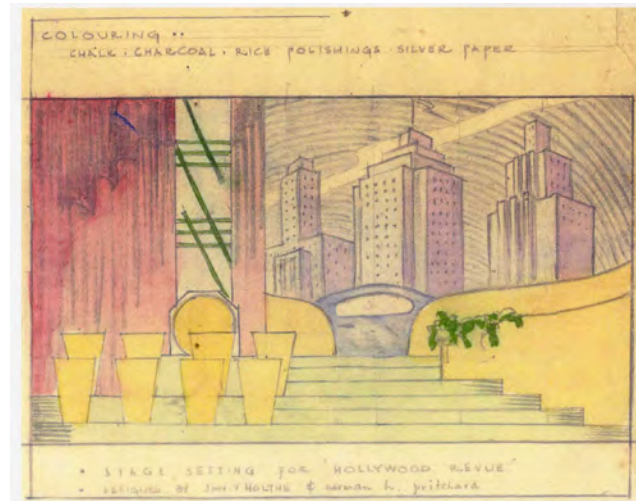


FIGURE 12.23. SET RENDERING FOR *HOLLYWOOD REVUE*. COURTESY OF NORMAN PRITCHARD.

Hollywood Revue, Pritchard's and van Holthe's first joint set design endeavor at Ubon, was heavily influenced by 1930s Art Deco style. Their color palette was limited to yellow, purplish-red, purple, and green. The band is placed at the left on three sets of risers (British, *rostrums*). These same risers, augmented with three steps, form a flight of stairs at center and on the right. Upstage center, framed by the entrance between two half walls, is a grey-blue ("silver") limousine, its door directly opposite the opening in the wall. Van Holthe's and Pritchard's notes on the rendering indicate what materials should be used to paint the set and create the metallic look of the limousine: "chalk, charcoal, rice polishings, silver paper." Silver paper came from the foil packaging used in tea chests and cigarette packs.

Their next production, *Bright & Breezy*, entailed a similar use of the stage. This time the color palette was primarily blue, grey, brown, and pink. The band, their pink music stands decorated with yellow sailboats, were moved to the opposite side. The backdrop shows a seaside pier jutting out into the ocean at left with a large, circular, three-tiered pavilion at its end framed by blue billowing clouds. A cartoon figure of a sailor with a life preserver painted on a large blue panel with a white and gold chevron design stands behind the band (see the rendering for *Bright & Breezy* in the Image Gallery, **Figure 12.24**).

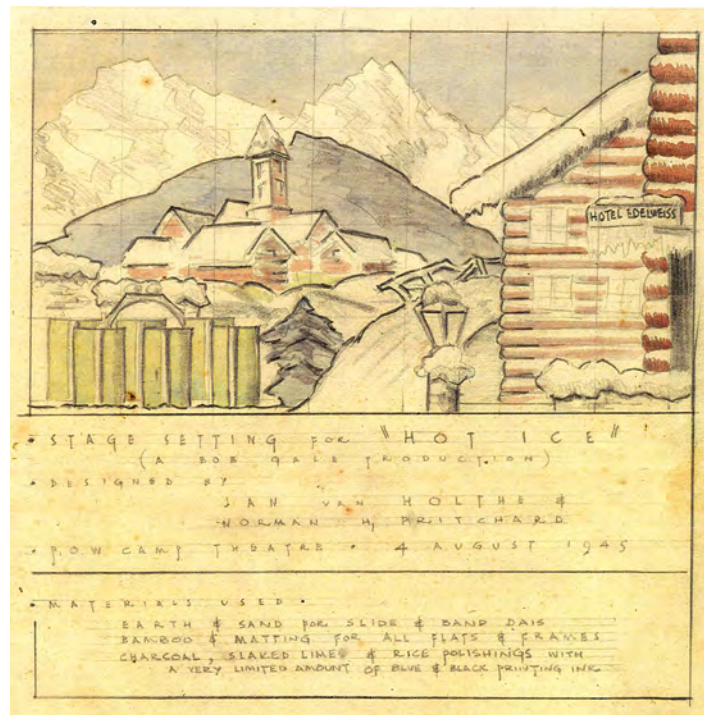


FIGURE 12.25. SET RENDERING FOR *Hot Ice*. COURTESY OF NORMAN PRITCHARD.

Hot Ice, the next-to-last show at Ubon, represents van Holthe's and Pritchard's most elaborate and sophisticated design work. Unlike the previous two settings, the design of this set implies that *Hot Ice* was a book-revue with a plot and characters. The setting is the grounds of a resort hotel in a small town in the Bavarian or Swiss Alps. The band has been placed on a dais at the back on the left; to its right sits a small fir tree. The right side of the stage is taken up with part of a large log building: the Hotel Edelweiss. Everything is laden with snow.

For this set, van Holthe and Pritchard incorporated into their design the door in the right proscenium arch. Painted to look like a log wall, it served as the main entrance to the hotel. Downstage of it is a snowdrift *ground row*.^{viii} Up center is a snow-covered toboggan slide that slopes down onto the stage from off to the right. A lantern on a post marks its terminus. Performers could make their entrances from upstage by riding in on toboggans.⁵⁸ Other entrances were made through the proscenium door on audience left, which, not included in the rendering, was seen as a neutral part of the stage.

Upstage of the set is an elaborate backdrop with snow-covered shrubbery in the foreground, a town hall with its tall central tower in the mid-distance, behind which looms a large blue-grey mountain. In the far distance are high snow-capped mountains seen against a pale blue winter sky.

^{viii} A ground row is a low, narrow, two-dimensional piece of scenery.

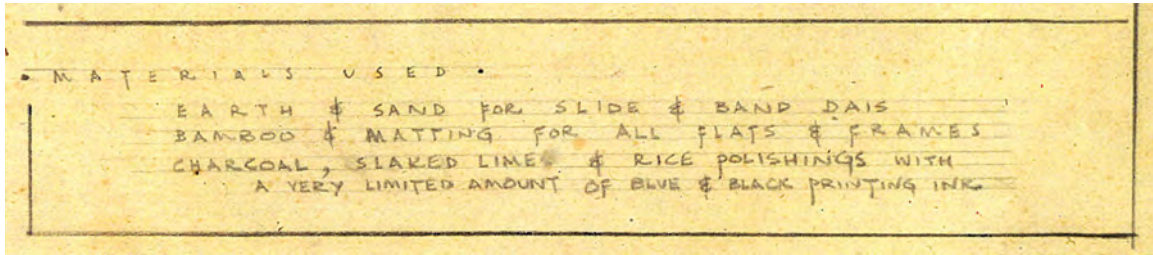


FIGURE 12.26. SET RENDERING FOR *Hot Ice*, DETAIL. COURTESY OF NORMAN PRITCHARD.

Van Holthe's and Pritchard's notes on the rendering indicate the materials to be used in building and painting this set: "Earth & sand for slide & band dais; bamboo & matting for all flats & frames; charcoal, slaked lime & rice polishings with a very limited amount of blue & black printing ink."⁵⁹

Thumbnail Sketches. Most of the illustrations of what sets actually looked like in performance come from Rae Nixon's thumbnail sketches included in the background of his costume renderings. One of his most complete sketches of a Frank Brydges setting is for the opening scene from *Dingbats Abroad*.



FIGURE 12.27. COSTUME PLATE FOR *DINGBATS ABROAD*, DETAIL. RAE NIXON. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL. COURTESY OF MRS. RAE NIXON.

This sketch shows the front of a stone house with shuttered windows and a door sitting at an angle on the left. At a matching angle on the right is a stable with a horse's head poking out over the top of a half-open stable door. Up center is a picket fence with an open gate. (The window shutters, the front door, the stable door, and the gate were apparently all *practical*, which means they could actually be opened and closed.) A tree stands to the right upstage.⁶⁰ Other settings for *Dingbats Abroad* took place on the deck of an ocean liner, at a nightclub in Paris, and at a Native American powwow in the Rocky Mountains. (Frank Brydges' sets for *Memories of the Gay 90s* will be examined more closely in Section D, below.)

C. Set Pieces and Properties

Scenic items the camp craftsmen and scenic technicians constructed out of bamboo, woven matting, tin cans, the small amount of wood available from tea chests and Red Cross boxes, and all sorts of other scrounged materials were marvels of inventiveness and skill. Since most of the POWs were not knowledgeable about the finer points of theatre terminology, their diary entries and memoirs tend to label anything they saw onstage other than the sets and costumes as "props." Still, it is important to make

distinctions between *set pieces* and *props*.

Set Pieces

Set pieces are usually fairly large constructions that are important parts of the setting but separate from it. They are generally divided into two categories: two-dimensional set pieces and three-dimensional set pieces.

Two-dimensional Set Pieces. A two-dimensional set piece needs some sort of external support. Examples would be the map of Europe being worked on in Kanburi (**see Figure 12.19**) or the silhouettes of St. Paul's Cathedral in *Gay 90s*. Like the "silver" limousine made of bamboo matting in *Hollywood Revue*, they can even become an integral part of the action.

Three-dimensional Set Pieces. Three-dimensional set pieces are self-supporting. The cabaret bar in *Wonder Bar* would be an excellent example of a set piece, or the "little annexe" and apple tree in *Memories of the Gay 90s*. The blossoming apple tree was "solved by Arthur Shakes carrying a dead tree half a mile, nailing it down on the stage and spending hours laboriously smothering it with paper blossoms tinted with red ink stolen from the Jap orderely room," wrote Carter. The "little annexe" was constructed of wood taken from dismantled Red Cross boxes that were then "painstakingly" sawn into lattice strips "to form a charming summer-house."⁶¹

Properties

Props, on the other hand, are everything else that appears onstage that is not actor, costume, or scenery. This very large category can be subdivided into furniture, set dressing, and hand props.

Furniture. All sorts of furniture were made for the shows: chairs, wardrobes, beds, tables, divans, and a fainting couch. The two deck chairs Carter needed for *Gay 90s* "took four days to hack out of hardwood with a rusty saw and then were used for only three minutes in a front cloth during a scene change."⁶² Actually, a longer scene they were supposed to be in was cut from the show, which must have caused some hard feelings among the props crew.^{ix} They were used later in *Dingbats Abroad*.

At Chungkai, Colonel Cary Owtram praised the marvelous work of "a devoted bank of professional makers-up led by Sergt. Taylor of the Norfolks."⁶³ Terry Morris recalled "two remarkable bits of furniture" made by their props crew: "One was of a grand piano constructed out of bamboo and rush matting, and also a radiogram^x of similar construction material."⁶⁴ The piano was actually a baby grand, and it almost fooled Norman Carter when he saw it onstage: "It looked real but inspection showed that it was a 'prop' made of bamboo and reed matting, camouflaged with soot from the cookhouse." Even the pedals worked.⁶⁵

"The radiogram," Morris explained, "had a panel at the front with a sliding element, so when you opened the lid of the radiogram, it pulled the slide away to reveal a cocoanut oil lamp, i.e. it gave the impression . . . as you lifted up the lid, [that] you sort of switched the machine on for action."^{xi66} Musicians and actors were positioned on the other side of the set wall behind it so the sound seemed to emanate from the radiogram itself.⁶⁷

Set Dressing. *Set dressings* are small items, like mirrors, paintings, bric-a-brac on a fireplace mantle, and so on for interior settings, or vines or flowers for exterior settings, added to a set to "dress it up" and make it appear more aesthetically pleasing and/or realistic.

^{ix} A common occurrence.

^x The British term for a large floor-model console radio.

^{xi} This is exactly how some radio console models were made.

Hand Props. Any object handled by an actor in a show is considered a *hand prop*: a cigarette, eyeglasses, the beer steins and glasses in *Wonder Bar*—the latter “made out of quinine bottles cut round the middle by the string method,”⁶⁸ the multicolored parrot that sat on Ted Weller’s wrist as he sang the “Bluebird of Happiness”—the list is endless.

Jim Jacobs had fond memories of Less Luff,^{xii} the props person at Tamarkan: “He was a genius at making hand props; he even contrived to manufacture a set of puppets which were used as dancing marionettes in the Toy Shop scene from *Pinocchio*.”⁶⁹ But it was the puppet for *Pinocchio* that posed the biggest technical problem for Luff to solve:

The puppet . . . had to be an exact copy of Wally [McQueen], down to the last button. The matter was finally solved by smothering Wally’s face in papier-mache (old tenko [roll call] papers and rice-paste), and leaving two small holes for breathing. Then our little comic had to lie on his back until the soggy mess had dried out. It took four hours. After this, Brydges painted the mask to look like Wally and it was stuck on the puppet’s head. [Frank] Purtell [the costumer] slapped on a little cap with a jaunty (duck) feather and behold—*Pinocchio*!⁷⁰

Then, of course there was the question of how to transform the wooden puppet into its living embodiment, Wally McQueen. “In Disney’s classic picture this took hundreds of feet of film,” observed Carter. “We managed with two feet—Wally’s. The show opened in the Toy Shop, with the Old Toymaker (Les Atyeo) admiring the puppet he had just finished. He then pulled out a long drawer from the back wall, put the puppet in, and slid the drawer back into the wall. Wally then lifted out the dummy, got into the drawer himself, and when the Toymaker pulled it out—*Pinocchio* was animated.”⁷¹

Major Technical Achievements

In all the POW accounts of the theatrical activity that took place along the Thailand-Burma Railway, three remarkable technical achievements stand out: one is the giant lotus that opened and closed in *Circus Cavaljos* at Chungkai; another, the turntable stage in *Hi Gang!* at Nong Pladuk; and the last, the American B-29 bomber flying onto the stage at the climax of the “Victory Show” at Ubon.

The Lotus. The articulated lotus that appeared in the “Mystery of the Lotus” dance in *Circus Cavaljos* was, in Terry Morris’ words, “a work of amateur genius.”⁷² During the performance, a dancer called the Spirit of the Lotus stepped out of the center of this huge unfolding lotus blossom and then returned to it as it closed up around her (this scene is more fully described in Chapter 6: “Chungkai Showcase”).

Joop Postma, the show’s producer-director, described its construction: “The making of the lotus flower was a big job. We made it on very thin laths of bamboo that could be curved in the shape of a petal and then had it covered with paper.”⁷³ The mechanism that caused the lotus blossoms to open and then close up again was worked from behind the backdrop by crew members.

The Turntable Stage. For the finale of the show *Hi Gang!* “Tich” Harrison and his tech crew produced a turntable out of metal, wood, and bamboo. Its construction and operation were explained by performer Fergus Anckorn:

^{xii} Luff had been rescued off the H.M.A.S. Perth before it went down.

But they made a turntable stage. . . . They had a [railway] rail, and [Harrison] got some wheels from somewhere, roller skate-type wheels . . . and they had a big handle. And the people at the back would be pushing this around. And the curtains were drawn back—rice sacks—and you’d seen this lot playing on there—Ace Connolly, Bob Gale, and all that lot—and as they finished their act, they were playing off, and the thing would come around, and all there was the new lot on. And that was just done with bits of wood and this circular stage.⁷⁴

The B-29. It is Anckorn, too, who recalled the replica of an American B-29 long-range bomber being slowly lowered to the stage during the finale of the “Victory Show” as the song “Out of the Blue Came Freedom” was sung.^{xiii}

But how they did it, I don’t know, because the windows of the aircraft had cellophane on [them], and where that came from, I don’t know. I don’t know what it was hooked up to . . . must have been a bamboo [batten?] . . . but it was a four-engine plane, and it looked like one, and people were in it. And they must have lowered it down from behind the proscenium.

And it came down with all propellers turning and people waving through the windows and flags waving. . . . It was a tremendous finale, it really was.⁷⁵

[To hear Fergus Anckorn tell about these technical achievements, listen to **Audio Link 12.1.**]

Audio



12.1

D. Staging: Two Exceptional Productions

Two productions illustrate the extraordinary capabilities developed by the POW scenic artists, their stage technicians, and running crews: Leo Britt’s *Wonder Bar* at Chungkai in May 1944 and Norman Carter’s *Memories of the Gay 90s* at Tamarkan a month later. Each of these productions required extensive scenery, and each used a different staging method.

Wonder Bar

Leo Britt’s production of the musical comedy *Wonder Bar* used “box set” staging. A box set creates the illusion of an enclosed interior space. This type of staging was ideal for theatrical productions of plays like *Night Must Fall*, which employed one setting throughout. Or, like Wim Kan’s *Roland ons Kind*, used

^{xiii} Jock Cameron, who had been a member of “Tich” Harrison’s crew at Nong Pladuk, headed up the stage technicians at Ubon.

the same set for three different interiors by changing the furniture and set dressing during the act break. Changing from one box set to another during a performance on these rudimentary proscenium stages could be cumbersome, noisy, and time consuming, so it was normally not attempted. Plays calling for more than one setting were rewritten so they could take place in a single setting.

Since each side of the reversible wings at Chungkai could have its own design, box settings there could be completely changed. Arthur Johnston's remark about the set changes for *Wonder Bar*—"Two complete changes of scenery with very little waiting between acts"—suggests that in his experience such efficiency was usually not the case.⁷⁶

Whatever the original London production of *Wonder Bar* might have required in terms of settings, it is difficult to believe that the producers didn't exploit the possibilities of at least one outdoor scene in the wonderland of the Swiss Alps. But combining interior box sets with an exterior setting in the same production would have been difficult, so Britt's version was revised to take place in two separate interior locations inside the Grand Hotel at St. Moritz, Switzerland: "Sir Charles Bedroom Suite" (Act I) and "The 'Wonder Bar' Cabaret" (Acts II and III). Even then set designer Te Tovey faced a difficult challenge.

Little is known about what the "Sir Charles Bedroom Suite" set actually looked like, except what can be gleaned from Arthur Johnston's and Selby Milner's brief accounts. What Johnston records was: "Bedroom scene with wardrobes, full length mirrors, a double bed and divan and 'Bobby' Spong (female impersonator) in bed in nightgown, right up to the best London presentation and standard."⁷⁷ To this description, Milner adds, "lady's bedroom. . . included all the usual articles of furniture, which looked as if they might have come from a London furniture house, despite their being made of bamboo, bamboo-matting, sacking, and bits of cloth, string, tin-foil from tea chests, quantities of white-wash and charcoal."⁷⁸ Side wings in the closed position together with a back wall with a doorway may have completed this setting.



FIGURE 12.28. *Wonder Bar* DETAIL. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF MARTIN PERCIVAL.

The *Wonder Bar* photograph provides a partial view of "The 'Wonder Bar' Cabaret." Here are the reverse sides of the wings used for the setting in Act I—their inner construction clearly visible but tricked out with some crosspieces to create the look of trellises for a garden restaurant/night club. Entrances and exits into the cabaret could be made through the two upstage doorways or by the proscenium arch down right and left.

The cabaret set contains small, round, cloth-covered cocktail tables and stools. In the background

is the thatched-roof bar, counters and back shelves laden with prop beer and liquor bottles “with glasses made out of quinine bottles cut round the middle by the string method.”⁷⁹ On the back wall a sign reads, “Wonder Bar.” Risers create steps leading to an outside balcony accessible through two wide doorways. Visible through the door openings are a balcony with a scrolled “wrought-iron” (bamboo) railing and, beyond it, a painted backdrop of snow-capped Alpine mountains. The snow-capped mountains were actually three-dimensional, Selby Milner informs us, “made by sticking quantities of kapok fluff onto a bamboo-matting screen.”⁸⁰ The whole back half of the cabaret set could have been preset behind the Act I setting to facilitate the set change.

Memories of the Gay 90s

Norman Carter’s *Memories of the Gay 90s* was likely the most elaborate and complex theatrical production ever mounted in the POW theatres of Thailand. The plot line of this original revue repeated the typical pattern of following a few characters on a trip abroad, thus permitting a series of exciting interior and exterior locations.

Inspired by the nineteenth-century British Victorian music hall, *Memories of the Gay 90s* called for nine set changes involving six different sets. Changes from one set to the next would be accomplished through “wing and drop” staging. *Wing and drop staging*, used in Western theatre since the Renaissance, employs a series of side wings and painted backdrops to create a variety of settings for a show. Revues and musical comedies, which used multiple settings and needed to make set changes quickly, normally employed this method. Performers could enter or exit the stage through any of the wings. In Carter’s production, the design painted on the wings remained the same throughout the show. Frank Brydges’ designs for the various *Gay 90s* sets exhibit both extensive knowledge of what late-nineteenth-century England or Paris looked like.

A Prologue introducing Mr. and Mrs. Dan Leno, the two main characters and the production’s premise, played on the apron downstage of the front curtain.



FIGURE 12.29. “LITTLE ANNEXE” SETTING. COSTUME PLOT DETAIL. RAE NIXON. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL. COURTESY OF MRS. RAE NIXON.

As the characters left the apron and settled into their “little annexe” in front of the proscenium

arch at audience right where they could reminisce about the past, the front curtains parted and Scene 1, the stage in the Old Bull and Bush Music Hall—the first of Dan and Lily’s memory scenes—was revealed.



FIGURE 12.30. COSTUME PLOT DETAIL SHOWING “MUSIC HALL” SETTING, RAE NIXON. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL. COURTESY OF MRS. RAE NIXON.

Rae Nixon’s sketch shows Lily Langtry standing on a planked wooden stage—the actual wooden floor of the Tamarkan theatre—in front of a backdrop painted with a low balustrade flanked by fluted columns. This scene was played *in one*, which means it was performed in the first slot downstage of the first set of wings, as scenery for the next scene had already been preset behind it. As this scene ended, the “Music Hall” drop was rolled up to reveal the full-stage setting for Scene 2: “The Parlour.”

In the background of Nixon’s sketch of Mr. and Mrs. Leno in their bower is a partial view of the “Parlour” setting onstage (see **Figure 12.29**). A back wall with a three-dimensional fireplace unit at its center sat upstage. Its mantle contained set dressing: a clock, a small vase of flowers, and some knickknacks. An oval mirror hung over it. To its right was a fainting couch; a painting hung on the wall. At least one other piece of furniture—a period wooden chair—was also part of the setting.

As the characters in the “Parlour” scene were leaving the stage, the “Music Hall” drop was lowered in readiness for Scene 3: “The Old Kent Road”—a musical turn by another music hall great—played *in one*. During his turn, the setting for the “Parlour Scene,” was removed so that when the “Music Hall” drop was rolled up, Scene 4: “The Margate Beach Scene” was revealed.

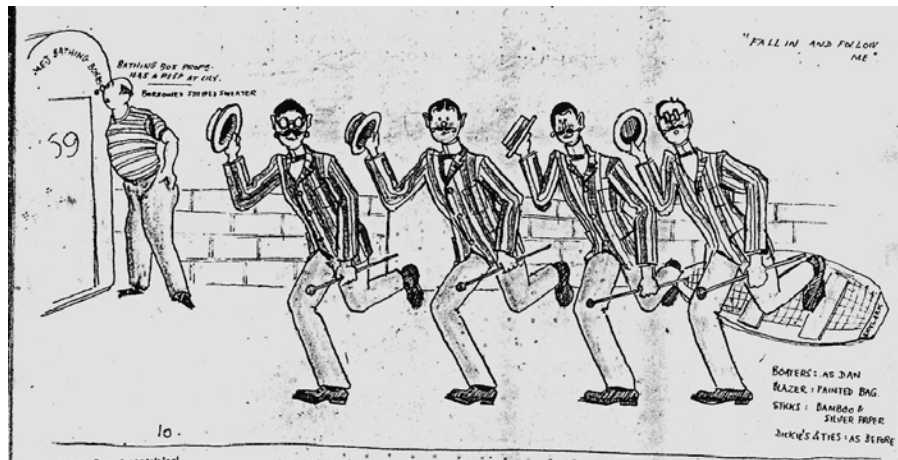


FIGURE 12.31. COSTUME PLOT DETAIL SHOWING “THE MARGATE BEACH” SETTING. RAE NIXON. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL. COURTESY OF MRS. RAE NIXON.

The “Margate Beach” setting consisted of two three-dimensional and practical bathing rooms^{xiv} flanking the stage at up right and up left. Upstage was a ground row painted to look like a dressed stone seawall with an opening at center leading (down?) to the beach, thus allowing entrances/exits to be made from upstage of the wall.^{xv} A lamppost stands upstage at left of center (not seen in **Figure 12.31**). Downstage of the wall at the right is a replica of a wherry—a type of rowboat available for rental at British seaside resorts. A backdrop painted to represent the sky hung upstage.^{xvi} Much of this setting, except for the bathing rooms and the rowboat, could also have been preset behind the Parlour Scene at the opening of the show, which would have facilitated the changeover.

As the characters exited Scene 4, a new rolled drop was lowered just downstage of the Margate set pieces for Scene 5: “The Can Can Scene,” which took place in a Parisian cabaret. Nixon did not provide a thumbnail of the set in his sketchbook, but he drew a separate view of the scene in performance from the audience’s perspective.

^{xiv} Bathing boxes, a feature of late-nineteenth-century British seaside resorts, were enclosed rectangular boxes on wheels in which people not only could change into their bathing suits but could then be rolled partway into the sea so that the ladies, in particular, could bathe more discreetly.

^{xv} Since the backstage area at Tamarkan was on a lower level, it is possible that characters going down to or coming up from “the beach” entered directly from it in front of the sky drop.

^{xvi} Or this could have been the back wall painted to function as a sky cyclorama.

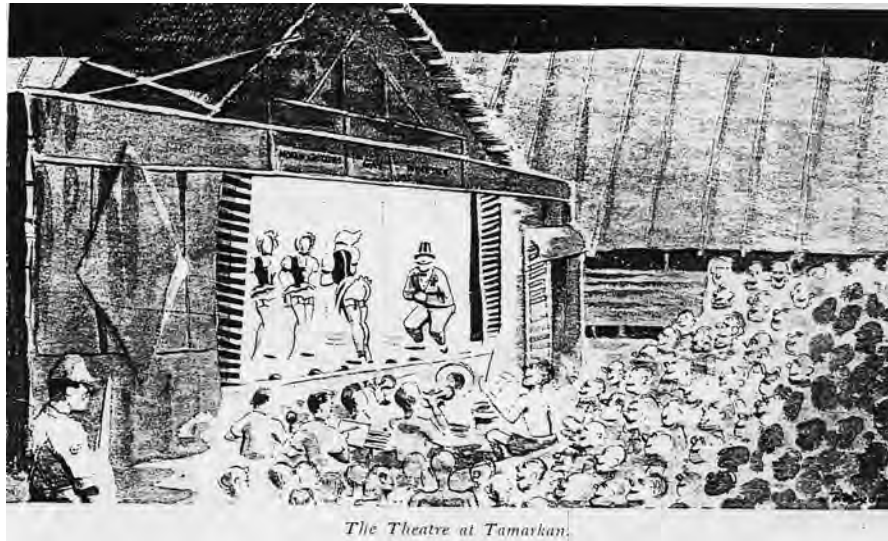


FIGURE 12.32. "THE CAN CAN" SETTING. RAE NIXON, AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL. COURTESY OF MRS. RAE NIXON.

This sketch shows the bonneted cancan dancers onstage, flipping their short ruffled skirts and showing off their bums while the French comedian cheers them on. The setting is difficult to see but seems to include a *tab curtain*—a curtain rigged to be pulled up “to form a triangular draped opening”^{xvii}—and fluted columns on the side wings.^{xvii} While this scene was taking place, the setting for Scene 6: “The Lights of London,” was put in place upstage of the backdrop.



FIGURE 12.33. "THE LIGHTS OF LONDON" SETTING. COSTUME PLOT DETAIL. RAE NIXON.



FIGURE 12.34. "THE LIGHTS OF LONDON" SETTING. COSTUME PLOT DETAIL. RAE NIXON.

AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL. COURTESY OF MRS. RAE NIXON.

^{xvii} These could be the same fluted column wings from the “Music Hall” scene.

The “Lights of London” scene took place on the London embankment. Upstage was the sky drop (first seen in the “Margate Beach” scene) with two-dimensional silhouettes of the city—the dome of St. Paul’s Cathedral is visible—standing in front of it. Downstage was a stone wall (the same ground row that appeared in the “Margate Beach” scene), but with a coffee stall placed at center in front of the wall’s opening. The lamppost from the Margate scene also reappeared, now downstage of the wall. When the “Lights of London” scene was over, the “Music Hall” backdrop was lowered again *in one* for Scenes 7, 8, and the hastily added 8-A—further re-creations of old music hall and variety numbers—to be played in front of it while a changeover to Scene 9: “The Orchard” took place behind the drop. As the performers in Scene 8-A left the stage, the “Music Hall” backdrop was raised, and the setting for Scene 9: “The Orchard Scene” was revealed.

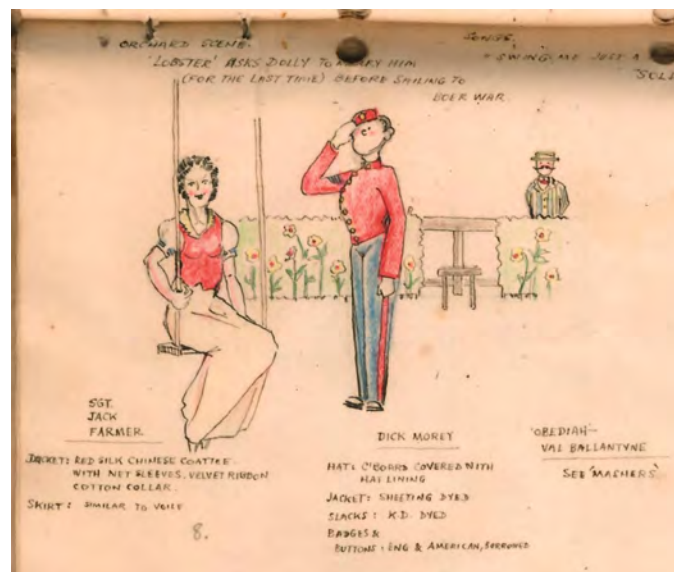


FIGURE 12.35. “THE ORCHARD” SETTING. COSTUME PLOT DETAIL. RAE NIXON. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL. COURTESY OF MRS. RAE NIXON

Not seen in this costume plot detail is the huge flowering apple tree that sat downstage at audience left. But the swing that was flown in from the grid (to look as if it hung from one of its branches) is visible. In the background was a low hedge (the stone wall ground row in a new guise, with a painted cloth over it), its center opening containing a turnstile; a row of flowers sat downstage of the hedge. Upstage behind the hedge was a path on which one character entered on a bicycle.^{xviii} Another small tree stood behind the hedge at up right. In the background is the ubiquitous sky drop (or back wall cyclorama).

Though *Wonder Bar* and *Memories of the Gay 90s* used completely different staging methods, they both required well-trained and rehearsed running crews to execute the changeovers effectively. With these two productions, Leo Britt and Norman Carter pushed the limits of what could be accomplished in the Thailand POW theatres.

^{xviii} The bicycle must have been borrowed from one of the Thai traders allowed in the camp.

Endnotes

- 1 Chalker, Notes.
- 2 Aylwin, IWM 67/330/1, typed page 3.
- 3 Chalker, Letter, 3 March 2000.
- 4 Pritchard, "the undefeated," 6.
- 5 Owtram, 109.
- 6 Chalker, Letter, 23 June 2003.
- 7 D. Smith, 110.
- 8 John Sharp, 1145.
- 9 John Sharp, 1145.
- 10 Coast, 175–176.
- 11 Tom Morris, Interview, 5.
- 12 Coast, 175–176.
- 13 Coast, 176.
- 14 Chalker, Letter, 23 June 2003.
- 15 Carter, 168.
- 16 Coast, 178.
- 17 Durnford, 145.
- 18 Chalker, Letter, 23 June 2003.
- 19 Baker, "Extracts from 'A Memoir,'" 15.
- 20 Ingram, 1.
- 21 Carter, 186.
- 22 Pritchard, "the undefeated," 6.
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- 24 Chalker, Letter 23 June 2003.
- 25 Coast, 170.
- 26 Chalker, Letter, 23 June 2003.
- 27 Coast, 170.
- 28 Carter, 168.
- 29 Carter, 168.
- 30 Rivett, illustration facing page 321.
- 31 Carter, 180–181.
- 32 Coast, 183.
- 33 Chalker, Letter, 3 March 2000.
- 34 Coast, 170.
- 35 Hardie, Diary, 5 January 1945.
- 36 Carter, 177–178.
- 37 Morris, Interview, 19.
- 38 Johnston, 113.
- 39 Peacock, 231.
- 40 Jacobs, 117–118.
- 41 Jacobs, 118.
- 42 Owtram, IWM, 105; Brazil, Letter, 29 October 2000; Thompson, 98.
- 43 Durnford, 145; Jacobs, 129; Owtram, 105.
- 44 Chalker, Letter, 23 June 2003.
- 45 Brazil, Letter, 29 October 2000; Chalker, 2007, 111; Coast, 185; Jacobs, 117, 129; Nixon, PIX, 16; Leffelaar and van Witsen, 257, trans. by Sheri Tromp; Owtram, 105; Mullineux, 22.
- 46 Leffelaar and van Witsen, 257, trans. by Sheri Tromp.
- 47 Jacobs, 117–118.
- 48 Chalker, Letter, 3 March 2000.

- 49 Brazil, Letter, 29 October 2000.
- 50 Carter, 169.
- 51 Ingram, 2.
- 52 Johnston, 113.
- 53 Johnston, 113.
- 54 Richardson, Diary, 82.
- 55 Carter, 186.
- 56 Jacobs, 129.
- 57 Brazil, Letter, 29 October 2000.
- 58 Pritchard, Interview, 17.
- 59 Pritchard Collection.
- 60 Nixon, Sketchbook, SK-16.
- 61 Carter, 171–172.
- 62 Carter, 171–172.
- 63 Owtram, 105.
- 64 Terry Morris, Self-interview #1, 5.
- 65 Carter, 179.
- 66 Terry Morris, Self-interview #1, 5.
- 67 Coast, 184–185.
- 68 Milner, Diary, 21 May 1944.
- 69 Jacobs, 117–118.
- 70 Carter, 170.
- 71 Carter, 170.
- 72 Terry Morris, Self-interview #1, 5.
- 73 Leffelaar and van Witsen, 249, trans. by Sheri Tromp.
- 74 Anckorn, Interview, 48, 64.
- 75 Compilation from Anckorn, Interview, 48–49, 63–64.
- 76 Johnston, 113.
- 77 Johnston, 113.
- 78 Milner, Diary, 21 May 1944.
- 79 Milner, Diary, 21 May 1944.
- 80 Milner, Diary, 21 May 1944.
- 81 Philip Barber, “New Scene Technicians Handbook,” as found in John Gassner’s *Producing the Play*, revised edition, 828–829.

The POW Theatre Production Handbook

Part Two: Lighting, Costumes, Musical Instrument Construction

E. Lighting

Light Sources

There were two primary sources of light for these proscenium theatres: daylight and/or some form of artificial light.

Daylight. Performances on yasume days in the camps usually took place in the late afternoon or early evening, “while it was still light.” Most theatres were situated so that the sunlight would come from behind the audience and strike the stage, not the audience’s eyes.

Evening performances did not necessarily demand artificial lighting, Tom Boardman recalled, because “for some unknown reason, the moonlight out there seemed to be a lot stronger than we get in England. It was brilliant; it was daylight. So, if it [the performance] coincided with a three quarter moon or a full moon, it was brilliant. You could read . . . in the moonlight.”¹ Since many of the first theatres in the hospital and relocation camps had stages without a roof, daylight (or moonlight) would illuminate the interior and upstage spaces. The diminishing natural light that occurred during an evening show could be used to powerful effect, such as in the final moments of *A New Revue*, when couples danced onstage as “In the Still of the Night” was sung, or in the panto *Aladdin*, when Ted Weller sang “Bluebird of Happiness.”

With the approach of the rainy season, it became apparent that roofs were needed to protect performers and painted scenery from the rain and that artificial lighting would be required to illuminate the enclosed stages. Approval for the use of artificial lighting was dependent upon how concerned the Japanese were that the camp might be vulnerable to Allied bombing attacks. Lacking permission, lighting technicians had to devise an alternative solution to light their enclosed proscenium stages.



FIGURE 12.36. SKETCH OF NAKHON PATHOM THEATRE. UNKNOWN DUTCH ARTIST.

In Nakhon Pathom and Nong Pladuk, down the line and closer to Bangkok, no artificial lighting was ever permitted.ⁱ Natural lighting for the upstage interior spaces of these structures was accomplished by positioning the theatres in such a way that afternoon light could stream in through a large trapdoor on the left side of the pitched roofs. The theatre in the strategically located “bridge camp” at Tamarkan also had a trapdoor in its roof for use when artificial sources of lighting were prohibited.

Artificial Light. When approved, artificial lighting, its sources and control, presented the POWs with a series of technical problems to solve.

Lighting Instruments and Their Placement

Footlights. One immediate source for artificial light and “instruments” were the camp-made “slush lamps” used in the huts at night. G. E. Chippington wrote of the pleasure of finally having lights in his hut at Chungkai in 1942: “We have now installed our own lighting system—small tins of oil plus ‘wick’—a short piece of thick thread held up by a wire. The light, though feeble, at least breaks the total darkness in the huts and acts as a ‘homing beacon.’”² Slush lamps could be made from such scrounged items as Kiwi tobacco containers or jam tins.

A row of these small oil lamps lined up across the front of the stage were used as *footlights*. Filled with coconut oil, pig oil, ghee (clarified butter), or any other oil the prisoners could lay their hands on and with wicks of braided thread, these lights gave off a warm, flickering light. A *ground row*—a long narrow panel—sitting just downstage protected the slush lamp wicks from being extinguished by the wind, shielded the audience’s eyes from their glare, and helped bounce the light upstage.

But slush lamps as footlights had two serious drawbacks: low intensity and diffuse focus, which meant that the *throw* from their unfocused flames could only illuminate the performers when they played directly in front of the lights.³ D. R. Mullineux’s report that “50 coconut oil lamps [were used] for the footlights” at Chungkai illustrates how the POWs tried to compensate for this deficiency.⁴

At Tamarkan, the technicians came up with another type of instrument that could also be employed as footlights: “hurricane lamps, blanked off with the sides of four-gallon oil or sugar containers.”⁵ Not only did the metal containers block the light from striking the audience’s eyes, but the shiny interiors acted as reflectors, throwing more concentrated light onto the stage.



FIGURE 12.37. SKETCH OF TAMARKAN THEATRE. DETAIL. COURTESY OF JACK CHALKER.

ⁱ One exception was made for a show at Nong Pladuk: see Chapter 7: “The Show Must Go On.”

Chalker's sketch of the theatre at Tamarkan shows this type of footlight in use.

Because the light produced by the hurricane lamps was more intense, it could illuminate more of the stage area. But whether the required intensity came from numerous slush lamps or hurricane lamps, distracting shadows were thrown on anything upstage of the actors who performed in front of them.

Front Lights. Experienced theatre people knew how to overcome this problem: they needed *front lights*—additional lighting that struck the stage from a different and higher angle. “Through the Japanese we bought three petrol lamps for stage lighting,” explained Jacobs, “which enabled us to put on our shows at night instead of in the later afternoon as previously. Using cut down petrol tins as reflectors, we obtained a much better effect from our scenery in the night light than we had in daylight.” As usual, the Japanese charged a huge fee for facilitating the transaction.⁶

Chalker's sketch of the Tamarkan theatre (above) shows a row of four strange-looking, triangular-shaped oblong boxes hanging over the front of the stage suspended from a bamboo “pipe” (*first electric*) at the top of the proscenium arch. These were the “petrol tins” that had been cut in half on the diagonal (thus the triangular shape) providing the “reflectors” for additional lighting. Tilted down so their more intense light could strike the actors from the optimum angle, they washed out the shadows caused by the footlights.

John Milford noted that the first front lights at Chungkai were “ingeniously contrived out of quinine bottles with reflectors made out of tinsplate from . . . one gallon bins.”⁷ The larger capacity of these variations on the “slush lamps” allowed them to burn longer.

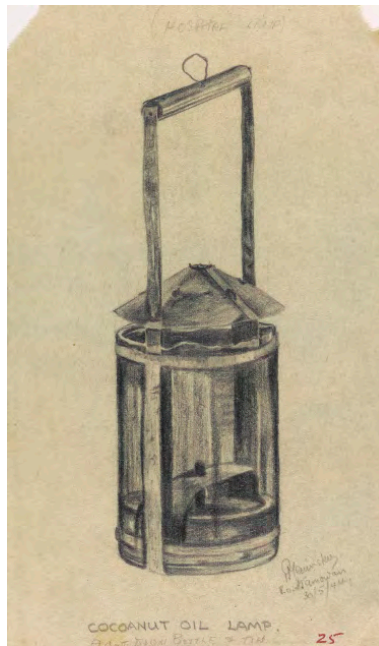


FIGURE 12.38. CAMP-MADE COCONUT OIL REFLECTOR LAMP. STANLEY GIMSON. IWM LD_006637. COURTESY OF THE FAMILY OF STANLEY GIMSON.

Stanley Gimson's sketch shows a prototype of this camp-made reflector light used in the hospital. Later, lighting technicians were able to borrow pressure lamps from the Japanese. When attending the

Promenade Concert in May 1944, Arthur Johnston noticed the qualitative difference the new front lights made: “Stage brilliantly lit by 2 mantle kerosene or petrol lamps suspended from bamboo rafter in front of the stage, and shaded by cut-away kerosene tins.”⁸ There would eventually be three such instruments.⁹

Photographs of the theatres at Ubon (see **Figure 12.14**) and Kanburi Officers’ Camp (see **Figure 12.2**) also display these reflectors suspended in front of the stage; at Kanburi, they cantilevered out from the bottom of the proscenium arch header so that the multiple instruments clustered inside could light the whole width of the stage.

Specials. But the POW producer-directors were not content with general illumination. They wanted the atmospheric “magic” that special lighting could bring to their shows. This effect would require additional lighting—lighting normally found in a professional theatre, such as *side lighting*, *top lighting*, or *spotlights*—that could highlight, shape, and tone the stage.

In his comments on the *Promenade Concert*, Johnston observed that the technicians were exploring more complex lighting: “Suspended from the rafters, out of sight of audience were also a further pair of mantle kerosene lamps (hurricane variety of about 500 candle power each) to light up the interior of the stage, and the whole gave a very good impression of a well lit substantial theatre stage and every bit as good as some of the scenes seen in the theatres at home.” Lights had even been incorporated into the scenic design: on the two supports for the three arches at the back of the stage were “two lamps of modernistic design supposed to be set in, something after this style.”¹⁰



FIGURE 12.39. *Wonder Bar* detail. Photograph courtesy of Martin Percival.

Though photographs of *Wonder Bar* were taken in daylight, some of the sophisticated lighting developed for use in that show is evident in the photograph above. Artificial light illuminates the three-dimensional Alpine mountains from lighting placed offstage in the wings and even from the top, as Johnston witnessed earlier in the musical concert.

Spotlights. During the spring and summer of 1944, the lighting designer-technicians at Chungkai continued to experiment. By the time the Javanese dancer Tari made his first appearance

onstage in July, *spotlights*—lights that could concentrate their beams in a more proscribed area—had been developed. Coast exulted that the audience would see “this impressive green and silver costumed dancer in a spotlight against a black [back clothⁱⁱ].”¹¹ Three months later, “all sorts of coloured spotlights” devised by Pat Stephenson were used in the “Balinese Scene” for *On Your Toes*—and then again to create “flashes of lightning” during the “Sleeping Beauty Ballet.”¹² A note in Colonel Owtram’s memoir claiming these were operated from offstage is confirmed by Leslie Fielding’s sketch of the new Chungkai theatre where two spotlights strike performers from offstage right and left.¹³



FIGURE 12.40. CHUNGKAI THEATRE DETAIL. SKETCH BY LESLIE FIELDING. IWM 1559 36.

Color Media. In the late 1930s and early '40s, there were three standard practices for achieving colored light. All required that some transparent colored medium be placed in front of the light. Changing this medium with one of a different color would, of course, change the color of the light. One practice was to use a thin sheet of colored gelatin held in place by a metal frame in front of the light. Another was to dip a lamp in a colored lacquer, or “lamp dip,” which would provide a transparent color medium on the glass’s surface. The third was to use a colored glass piece, or *roundel*, in front of a light.

Any of these techniques could have been used at Chungkai. Gelatin could possibly have been obtained by boiling down the hooves of the cattle used for food and dyeing the resultant goo. Dipping light bulbs was, of course, out of the question, but applying some sort of viscous lacquer-like, transparent substance to the glass chimney of a hurricane or petrol pressure lamp would produce the same effect (the dyes available to the POWs are cited in Section F: Costumes, below). Primitive roundels could have been treated the same way.

Control. Besides the angle and the color, the next most important capability is to control the light’s intensity. Dimming and/or brightening can create not only a shifting focus but a sense of movement. This possibility might seem beyond the POW lighting technicians’ capabilities, but this was not the case.

Describing the “Mystery of the Lotus” dance, Laurie Allison recalled that the stage had started in darkness and then the scene was revealed “in the glow of freshly lit lighting.”¹⁴ A sequential lighting of the footlights by crew members dressed in black working simultaneously from the center toward both

ⁱⁱ Coast wrote “front-cloth” here, but he clearly means that the dancer is to be seen as if performing in a void that would make both him and his costume “pop.”

ends (or vice versa) would have would have created the illusion of the lights “coming up.” And Colonel Owtram’s reference that the “stage lighting slowly faded to darkness” as the dance ended suggests the same procedure had been followed in reverse.¹⁵

Special Effects. Wilbur Smith, lighting designer for the shows in the Kanburi hospital camp theatre in 1944, wrote with pride about a unique lighting effect his crew had produced for a revue called *Nite and Day*: “We made our neon lightsⁱⁱⁱ by a piece of tin pulled across by a string on each side” in front of a kerosene pressure lamp borrowed from the Japanese.¹⁶ He explained that the tin was perforated with pinholes which spelled “New York” in flashing lights on the scenery when it was pulled forward and backward in front of the lantern.¹⁷

A strobe-like lighting effect was produced at Ubon for a nighttime outdoor skating scene in the show *Hot Ice*. Pritchard explained how it was done: “While the band played the Skaters Waltz, and skaters moved their feet appropriately, a lighting enthusiast spun a circle of cardboard with suitable holes cut in it in front of the one pressure lamp provided by the Nips. This gave the necessary flickering effect, and the impression that the chaps were actually skating.”¹⁸



FIGURE 12.41. UBON THEATRE. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF NORMAN PRITCHARD.

This imaginative lighting needed three things to make it work: semi-darkness on stage so the special effect would be visible, the right angle—ground level—for the light, and the active involvement of a stagehand. The dark rectangular “Prompter’s Box” visible at the front of the stage in the Ubon theatre photograph was the ideal place to hide a “lighting enthusiast.”

Other special lighting effects were noted by Mullineux: “Standard lamps, table lamps [f]or scenes were easily made from clay, wire and decorated with paper which, with a coconut oil lamp instead of an electric bulb, gave ample variety for change of scenery.”¹⁹ The lamppost center stage in the *Hot Ice* setting (see Figure 12.25) would most certainly have contained one of these oil lamps glowing in the background during the nighttime skating scene as well as the light that “came on” as the radiogram mentioned in Props earlier was opened.

ⁱⁱⁱ Smith probably means “chaser lights” instead of “neon lights.”

The fire danger from the use of these “live flame” lights in bamboo and atap theatres would have been extremely high, so the standard procedure of having sand or water buckets readily available backstage and in the wings must have been rigidly enforced. There are no accounts in the POW literature that any of these lighting instruments causing a fire and burning down a theatre.

Combining Sources

Clever producer-directors and lighting designers could combine the use of both natural and artificial light to their advantage—as Britt and his lighting person, E. L. Carr, did for their production of *Night Must Fall* at Chungkai. Cast member Hugh de Wardener explained how both sources of light had been employed to enhance the effectiveness of the mystery-thriller:

But Night Must Fall couldn't have been a better name and a better play for the audience. . . . And so as night fell as the play went on . . . and the sun set behind the audience (so what sun there was shone on the stage, you see) . . . the stage got darker and darker. And then the lights were lit, I suppose, between Act I and II (I can't remember).^{iv20}

Lighting Designers

Unfortunately, we know the names of only four of the POW lighting designer-technicians responsible for these shows, and all but one of them—Wilbur G. Smith at Kanburi—come from Chungkai. The first lighting person was Gerald Angier, who was succeeded by P. H. (“Stevie”) Stephenson when Angier took over responsibility for wardrobe. Stephenson was eventually followed by E. L. Carr.

F. Costumes

If the scenery and lighting delighted POW audiences, they were thrilled by the costumes they saw onstage. The appearance of an evening gown, or a suit, or anything other than G-strings and ragged military shorts was viewed as a triumph over adversity and lifted their spirits. Glamorous costumes for the female impersonators were especially prized, and the results, according to Ted Ingram, who witnessed what the wardrobe staff at Nakhon Pathom was capable of producing, were truly amazing: “The dresses, designed and made for the leading ladies in the shows, simply baffled description. Just odd pieces of cloth, scraps of sarongs, mosquito netting and sacking, a little home-made dye, and cotton from unpicked webbing—and the result perfect, alluring, and requiring no coupons.”^{v21}

Costumes can include a large category of items worn by performers. In this section, the term will cover accessories, wigs, and makeup as well as clothing. One terminology issue: *costume renderings* are a designer’s colored sketch of an individual costume; *costume plots* show all the costumes to be worn by an actor together on the same page.

^{iv} It is actually Act III that takes place at night.

^v Ingram wrote this article in Britain after the war when rationing coupons were still in use.

Costume Designers and Wardrobe Staff

When writing about the costumes that appeared in the shows, the POWs did not always make a distinction between those who designed the costumes and those who built them (sometimes they were the same people). To most writers, these separate activities were all identified as simply “wardrobe.”

“It was lucky for us that we had Frank Purtell with us,” Douglas Harris wrote in Tamarkan. “Frank had been a tailor with J. C. Williamson, the major theatrical producing organization in Australia. He seemed capable of making clothes out of anything. At one show a man appeared in a perfectly fitting full dress evening suit and another in a dinner suit equally well fitting. Both were made of rice bags blackened with charcoal.”²² Purtell gathered around him an extremely capable wardrobe staff.^{vi}

When Norman Carter started producing elaborate revues and pantos at Tamarkan, Purtell and his staff became so overwhelmed with the workload that Lieutenant Rae Nixon, a popular camp cartoonist, was enlisted to take over the design responsibilities. His immense contributions to the costuming of shows at Tamarkan will be considered later in this section.

Across the river at Chungkai, Puck Jonkmans was responsible for the remarkable costumes worn by the Het Hollandsch Cabaret. For British productions, the wardrobe department was in the very capable hands of Gerald Angier and his assistant, J. Olds. John Coast described Angier as “a jovial Humpty Dumpty of a man, very efficient.”²³

Kanburi Officers’ Camp had the expert services of Peter Bernard, at least for the N.E.I. productions. At Nong Pladuk, the female impersonator Basil Ferron took on the task of costuming many of the shows. And at Nakhon Pathom, Jack Chalker, besides being one of the most popular female impersonators, was heavily involved in designing and constructing costuming as well. His notes about the activity of the wardrobe staff provide excellent insider information on how costumes were designed and made in these POW workshops.

“A skill, invaluable to any costume making,” he wrote, “was that of the tailor and we were fortunate in having many amongst us in the camps. With the aid of their expertise some superb garments and costumes were produced.” Reminiscing about his “personal memories of costume making,” he wrote, “these were often made in our ‘sick’ huts as well as in the theatre area, back stage. My memories are of these small group activities, particularly in the living quarters where a cast member was draped with bits of cloth and bits stitched together with crude needles and reclaimed thread from army webbing or other bits of scrounged cloth—to form a garment. Where a tailor was available he could be brought in to assist.” “Needles,” he added, “were made from bits of filed steel or beaten brass from army webbing equipment.”²⁴

^{vi} *Signalmen E. Geary, N. Townsend, and E. Christensen of the 8th Division Signals; Signalman E. Kenney of the R.C.S.; Sergeant F. Atherton of the 2/4th C.C.S.; A. B. L. Luff and Hill from the Royal Australian Navy; and Gunner A. McNiven of the 2/10th Field Regiment.*

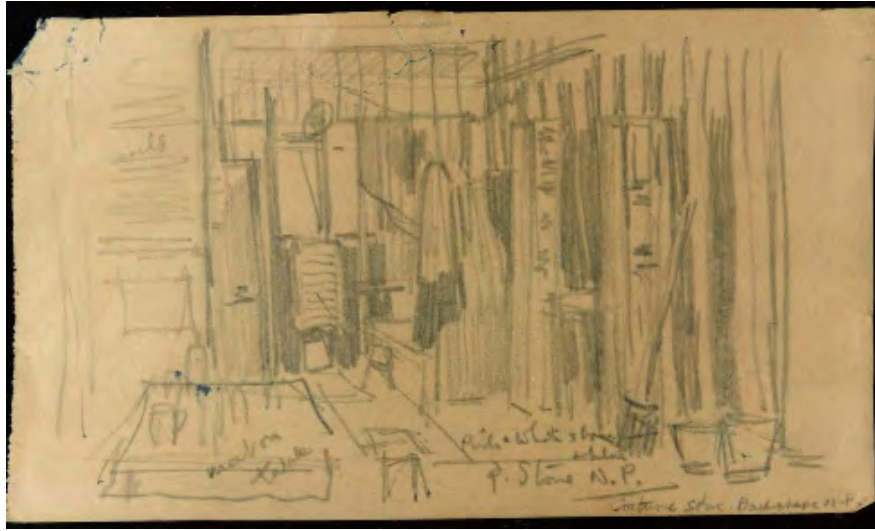


FIGURE 12.42. COSTUME SHOP AT NAKHON PATHOM. COURTESY OF JACK CHALKER.

Chalker's pencil sketch of the costume shop and storage area backstage in the last theatre constructed at Nakhon Pathom shows racks of costumes hung in two rows at the right, with shelves for accessories. A low table—possibly for cutting fabric—sits at left. At the back is a stove with a pipe extending up through the roof. The stove would have heated makeshift “irons” and boiled water for steaming and shaping clothing and accessories. Stools, buckets, and a broom complete the scene.

Costuming Sources

Costumes for the shows were either borrowed, purchased, or made from scrounged materials.

Borrowed. Clothing for men's costumes was always the easiest to come by from the kit carried Up Country by the POWs, primarily officers. Coast described Gerald Angier's method for obtaining and caring for borrowed clothing:

Each week Gerald collects all the available clothing we need to borrow in the camp, has it washed in the river over the week-end, and returned to the owners the following Monday. He has a ledger and knows just where he can lay his hands on the owner of a pair of flannels, a blue scarf, a white shirt or any of the other amazing bits of kit some of the cunning people still own who've not gone up country [on a maintenance party] or lost their kit.²⁵

Borrowing clothing for female characters was another story. But the wardrobe “Mistresses,” as Colonel Owtram teasingly called them,²⁶ learned not to underestimate what might be stashed somewhere among the odds and ends of treasured items that POWs carried with them. Chalker recounts one story of how some costuming “treasures” were acquired at Nakhon Pathom:

I believe it must have been for the Wodehouse play^{vii} that some women's underwear was required and to cope with this a quiet and discreet appeal had been made throughout the camp for help with these items. Much to everyone's surprise two pairs of silk cami-knickers were produced from two separate POWs and were lent to the cast on the strict understanding that the owners were to remain anonymous and that the items were to be returned in immaculate order without further comment. The whole operation had to take place through a middle-man and the conditions were strictly adhered to.²⁷

Purchased. But not all the soldiers were willing to loan their treasured possessions to benefit the stage. Jacobs remembered one English officer at Tamarkan "who had a dress suit complete with all accessories down to white tie and patent leather shoes . . . and steadfastly resisted all attempts of the concert party to borrow them as stage costume."²⁸ To deal with this kind of resistance, Jacobs, as entertainments officer, had to find some way to raise money to purchase such needed items either from camp personnel or local Thai traders.

To finance purchases we ran ten cent sweepstakes, with prizes of up to fifty ticals. We usually made a profit of 150 ticals on each sweep, and with this money we purchase[d] all sorts of materials in the camp. It was really amazing what some of the fellows had stowed away in their kit bags. One chap . . . had a lot of imitation jewelery [*sic*], which helped to make our female impersonators look more glamorous. From others we purchased a grey civilian overcoat, ladies handbags, lengths of dress materials, crayons and paints, shirts, slacks and tonettes.²⁹

At Chungkai, instead of running a sweepstakes, the income from ticket sales was used to purchase items from other POWs or Thai vendors.

Camp Made. If appropriate clothing couldn't be borrowed or purchased, the costumes had to be made from what could be altered from in-stock or from scrounged material. Anything and everything, Chalker asserted, became grist for the wardrobe mill:

Many costumes were made from odd bits of unwanted/rotting mosquito netting, from bits of blanket, old army shirts or shorts, woven bamboo matting or any other scrounged materials. . . . Old tins, bits of silver paper from the Japanese compound, collected birds feathers, bits of animal hide from pig or bullock brought into the camp for food, bones, stolen bits of wire or nails—anything that could be used that could be adapted to our needs was hoarded and valuable, demanding considerable ingenuity and skill—and great fun as well as effort in achieving a successful result.³⁰

^{vii} Good Morning Bill.

If the burlap gunny (“Hessian”) sacks, rice or sugar sacks, old tent canvas, or mosquito netting were not used as front curtains or backdrops, they, too, became major sources of fabric for costumes.³¹

And cardboard, available from American Red Cross packages, became useful for all sorts of costuming needs: at Tamarkan, as the foundation for a series of bonnets, top hats, men’s dickies, ties and bustles;³² in Chungkai, for a “massive traditional Wayang hat . . . a mask . . . [a]nklets, bracelets, and earrings from silver-paper-cardboard” for the Javanese court dancer, Tari’s, first appearance on stage.³³

Even the fluffy, cotton-like fibers surrounding the seeds of the kapok trees growing in or around the camp found a use. “We continued to collect it near Chungkai using it for clinical purposes,” wrote Chalker, “but also found it ideal for padding primitive mosquito-netting brassieres for stage female parts, providing shapely molded breasts and ponderous stomachs when required.”³⁴

Female impersonator Custance Baker found what he thought was a better way to solve the lack-of-breasts problem: “When we started as girls most of us tried grossly padded bras but found them unsatisfactory. Most men have some sort of pectoral muscles and we found that a very little padding was enough to provide a convincing outline.”

In his estimation, the more difficult problem was lower down:

Hips were more difficult. Most men particularly POWs, have much slimmer hips than women of the same height and we needed quite a lot of padding to achieve the proper shape. This tended to show under a close fitting frock, which completely destroyed the illusion. . . . I had kept an old batik silk sarong with my kit and I tore it into four or five eight-inch wide strips. When there were stitched together end to end they made a strip about ten or twelve yards long. With a friend to hold the far end I could roll myself in to this as a spiral bandage over my padding, which then produced a very smooth and supple silhouette.³⁵

Costuming *Wonder Bar*

The *Wonder Bar* photographs reveal what extraordinary results could be obtained by combining these three sources of costuming materials. For this large-cast production, Gerald Angier, J. Olds, and their wardrobe staff produced well over thirty costumes.



FIGURE 12.43. *Wonder Bar* DETAIL. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF MARTIN PERCIVAL.

The photograph above shows seventeen characters—twelve men and five women—all wearing

outfits appropriate to the guests and staff of a high-class holiday hotel in the Swiss Alps, where this musical comedy takes place.



FIGURE 12.44. *Wonder Bar* DETAIL: "SIMON." PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF MARTIN PERCIVAL.



FIGURE 12.45. *Wonder Bar* DETAIL: "PETER." PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF MARTIN PERCIVAL.

Men's Costumes. The divorce lawyer Simeon Process, at left, wears a tweedy-looking sports jacket, white shirt with a tie, light-colored trousers, and socks with incongruous camp-made clogs. Peter de Freece, at right, wears a white shirt with a dark tie and light-colored pleated trousers. It's difficult to see what he's wearing on his feet.



FIGURE 12.46.
Wonder Bar
DETAIL: "BOBSLEIGH
TEAM MEMBER."
PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY
OF MARTIN PERCIVAL.

Members of the bobsleigh team are scattered throughout the ensemble. Like the one pictured

above, most appear to be wearing white scarves (ascots?) under dark V-neck sweaters. A team emblem is sewn on the left chest of each sweater. They wear light-colored knit or cloth caps and light-colored trousers tucked into the tops of camp-made ski boots..



FIGURE 12.47. *Wonder Bar* DETAIL: "PAUL." PHOTOGRAPH
COURTESY OF MARTIN PERCIVAL.

Most of the other men clearly visible in the *Wonder Bar* photograph are members of the hotel staff wearing traditional Swiss outfits of lederhosen, long-sleeved white shirts, black bow ties, and dark vests. Only Paul, the hotel chamber boy, at right, wears the traditional lederhosen suspenders. All wear light-colored knee socks and camp-made clogs on their feet.



FIGURE 12.48. *Wonder Bar* detail: "Mirabelle." PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF MARTIN PERCIVAL.

Women's Costumes. Mirabelle Swam, the leading female character played by Bobby Spong, sits at right center. She wears a strapless gown that shows off her slender neck and shoulders. Unlike the other women's outfits, the fabric for Spong's gown has reflective qualities, like the sheen of silk or satin, and drapes well around his body, having both softness and weight. Since such fabric would have been impossible to find in the camp, Spong was most likely wearing one of the dresses he brought up to Thailand from Singapore. Mirabelle is also wearing earrings (and probably a necklace, but the image is too indistinct to tell). A small matching pillbox hat sits on her head.



FIGURE 12.49. *Wonder Bar* DETAIL: "MILANIA."
PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF MARTIN PERCIVAL.



FIGURE 12.50. *Wonder Bar* DETAIL: "LADY ELIZABETH."
PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF MARTIN PERCIVAL.

The other female characters were costumed by the wardrobe staff. Milania de Freece, on the left above, wears a sleeveless scoop-necked gown which has a soft layer of mosquito netting over some more opaque material and shoulder straps and a ruching ruffle trim around the bodice. Her right foot pokes out from the bottom hem of the gown, offering just a glimpse of one of her camp-made high-heeled shoes. On the right, gossip columnist Lady Elizabeth Craig wears a sleeveless top over a mosquito net skirt.

The other female characters wear dresses of a similar design: dark straps hold up lighter-colored V-neck bodices gathered in front that are attached to either dark or light-colored skirts. All the female impersonators in the *Wonder Bar* photographs appear to be wearing camp-made falsies.

Designing and Constructing Women's Outfits

Designing and building outfits for the female characters was the most challenging of all the wardrobe staff assignments. The "professional" female impersonators like Bobby Spong took responsibility for supplying their own gowns and accessories. At Nakhon Pathom, Fergus Anckorn witnessed them engaged in altering their dresses to ensure they had new and different outfits for each show: "They made their own dresses. They'd sit there sewing for hours, you know, making these lovely dresses."³⁶ For his role in *Hay Fever* at Chungkai, Custance Baker remembered he "actually wore a pretty white tennis frock with a pleated skirt and white shoes, which I made myself."³⁷

Costuming the other female characters was up to the wardrobe staff, and after years of imprisonment and isolation, this task, Chalker conceded, really tested their memories: "We tried to remember what women had been wearing. We had no reference. But we put our heads together and made these damned things out of odds and ends."³⁸



FIGURE 12.51 & FIGURE 12.52. RENDERINGS FOR WOMEN'S OUTFITS. COURTESY OF JACK CHALKER.

Chalker's color renderings of women's outfits for productions at Nakhon Pathom show two filmy day frocks and an evening gown for which dyed mosquito netting was the ideal fabric. The tailored black and white ensemble at left would most likely have been made of sacking dyed or painted.

Fabric Dyes

If designers and wardrobe staff were going to have any versatility and range in the color of the costumes they constructed, fabrics would have to be painted or dyed. Sources for pigments and paint for sets have already been examined in Part One, and some of these would be used to paint costumes as well. Bernard's notes on his costume renderings also provide specific information on what color could be obtained from what sources:

Green	extracted from [boiled] leaves
Yellow	curry powder from kitchen mixed with chalk
Black	soot from same source, with starch
Red and Purple	from mercurochrome and permanganate
Brown	from clay
Blue	from low-grade Japanese ink ³⁹

At one point the wardrobe crew in Tamarkan was able to purchase "coloured inks" through a Japanese soldier who made an exorbitant profit on the deal.⁴⁰

Additional Accoutrements

Accessories

Accessories are those add-ons to a basic costume, such as hats, shoes, jewelry, handbags, gloves, stockings, brassieres, and the like, that help define a character more thoroughly. Most of the accessories noted below are for female characters.

Men's caps were made from burlap bags. For the valet in the production of *Dingbats Abroad*, the unique shape of a bowler hat was first sculpted in clay and then covered in papier-mâché to get a positive mold.⁴²

Shoes. Shoes for the male characters were borrowed if at all possible. If not, as was the case for many of the men in *Wonder Bar*, they used “go-aheads”—clogs carved from wood with rubber or cloth straps that were made in the camp and worn by everyone daily. Women's high heels, on the other hand, were impossible to come by and had to be made.

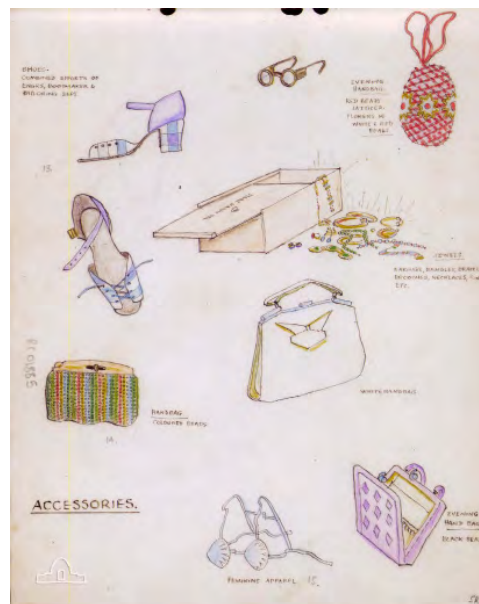


FIGURE 12.55. “ACCESSORIES.” RAE NIXON. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL. COURTESY OF MRS. RAE NIXON.

Rae Nixon devoted a whole page of his sketchbook to a rendering of accessories. At upper left is a pair of women's high-heeled shoes seen from both the top and side view. His accompanying note indicates that their construction was a group effort, employing the “combined efforts of Engrs [Engineers], Bootmakers & Tailoring Dept.”⁴³

Handbags, Jewelry, Etc. Nixon's “accessories” rendering also shows daytime and evening handbags (two of which use seeds for beading), the “Krown Jools” box containing the collection of “earrings, bangles, bracelets, brooches, necklaces, rings, etc.” purchased from a POW, a pair of glasses, and the construction details for brassieres or, in Nixon's more polite term, “feminine apparel.”⁴⁴

Besides the unexpected appearance of ladies' underwear mentioned earlier, the wardrobe staff at Nakhon Pathom came in for another surprise when their request for a seemingly impossible item was answered: “About the same time as this a woman's handbag appeared on loan to the theatre group and this was even more curious than the underwear revelation and caused a great deal of mirth and conjecture! We could carry very little [Up Country] because we had long marches and how the hell could anyone take a woman's handbag up there? We could believe the cami-knickers . . . OK, yes, but not the handbag. Anyone having a fetish about a handbag must be interesting.”⁴⁵

Stockings. For his *Memories of the Gay 90s* production, Carter insisted that he wanted his cancan dancers to wear silk stockings. Nothing, he said, could be faked to look like them. This seemed an impossible request, but when the appeal went out to the camp for these items, “six pairs of silk stockings appeared out of someone’s kit-bag—still in their cellophane wraps.”⁴⁶ The owner had purchased them in Singapore for his wife before being captured.⁴⁷ Now, after two years and four months of captivity, they were sold to Jacobs for ten ticals.⁴⁸

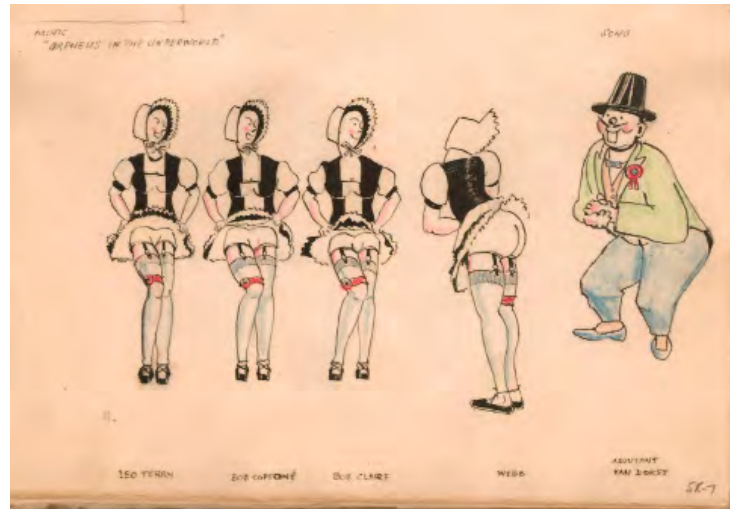


FIGURE 12.56. “CAN-CAN DANCERS.” COSTUME PLOT DETAIL. RAE NIXON, AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL. COURTESY OF MRS. RAE NIXON.

Nixon’s costume plot for the cancan dancers and the Dutch comedian shows the famous silk stockings. “The genuine article—dyed blue” are Nixon’s instructions to his wardrobe crew. The rest of the cancan outfits were to be made as follows: “Suspenders: wire clips & bachelor buttons, pairs of braces, bag. Garters: Elastic & sherred silk. Slippers: Bag & c/board [cardboard].”⁴⁹

Wigs

Having good wigs was crucial to the leading female impersonators, and various wardrobe staffs attempted to make these articles as well. It proved to be one of their most challenging technical problems, and the men who perfected the art of wig making were so valued that they received special credit in souvenir programs.

Artificial “hair-like” materials. According to Jack Chalker, the wigs in Nakhon Pathom were made from “teased-out hemp”:

The Japanese . . . brought in a great deal of raw hemp and set lines of legless men to comb it out on blocks set with nails. The purpose of this was to prepare the hemp for rope making and some of the sick POW’s were involved in making the ropes with which to raise or lower the bamboo-matting stage curtains, but also for the manufacture of wigs.⁵⁰



FIGURE 12.57. WIGS. COURTESY OF JACK CHALKER.

Chalker went on to explain their construction process:

Wigs were made by first producing a light head cap of mosquito netting onto which carefully teased-out hemp was sewn. This could be curled or straight according to requirements and could be coloured with the use of soot and tapioca ‘goo,’ or a range of browns from ground clays or other colouring matter. Wig making, in my own limited experience, occurred mostly in Nakorn Pathom [sic] and were singularly sophisticated.⁵¹

The versatile tapioca “goo” used as a sizing for scenery paint could also give a “set” to the ladies’ stylish hairdos.

The most effective and lifelike wigs were made at Tamarkan by the Dutch POW R. Jansen out of other, more human “hair-like” materials: cow or yak tails and even Scotsman’s sporrans.^{viii52}

^{viii} *The fur- or hair-covered leather purses worn by the Gordon Highlanders as part of their dress uniforms.*



FIGURE 12.58. "Two Wigs" DETAIL. RAE NIXON. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL. COURTESY OF MRS. RAE NIXON.

Nixon's notes accompanying his sketches of Jansen's wigs tell us that there "were three 'stock' wigs in Tamarkan wardrobe—two brunette and one blonde—each given a fresh 'perm' for the next show."⁵³

But full-head wigs for the female characters weren't the only challenges for Jansen. For the character of the valet, Egbert, in *Dingbats Abroad*, he made a "bald wig out of a cow's bladder with a detachable toupee!"⁵⁴ And because there wasn't time for the actors to grow their own handlebar mustaches to play the "Mashers" in *Gay 90s*, he "made them out of the clippings from cow's tails" (see **Figure 12.54**).⁵⁵

When the Tamarkan POWs were transferred to Chungkai in late 1944/early 1945, Jansen became part of Joop Postma's Het Hollandsch Cabaret and went on to achieve even greater glory in wig construction. "And don't forget our wig maker, Jansen," exclaimed Philip Brugman, "who could create the most beautiful ladies wigs from cow tails: platinum, red, 17th century—he did it all and supplied for all the theatre groups, such as the English and Australian."⁵⁶

Human hair. Because of the difficulty in creating effective wigs for the female impersonators, some POW commanders allowed their top impersonators to grow their hair out. It was very possible, therefore, to see these men parading around the camp with their long hair up in curlers, much to the consternation of some other officers and men.



FIGURE 12.59. *Wonder Bar* DETAIL: BOBBY SPONG.
PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF MARTIN PERCIVAL.



FIGURE 12.60. *Wonder Bar* DETAIL: DOUGLAS MORRIS. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF MARTIN PERCIVAL.

In these details from the *Wonder Bar* photographs, Bobby Spong, on the left, wears his long brunette hair in an upsweep. Douglas Morris, at right, wears his soft blond hair down and curled about his face.

The other female characters in the *Wonder Bar* photographs are wearing turbans, which were not only appropriate to the time period of the production but, more importantly, eliminated the need for wigs. A lock of the actor's own hair was pulled out at the front to suggest more hair underneath.

Makeup

As with costumes and accessories, makeup not only helped the actors transform more completely into their characters but also helped project their facial features to the back rows in the thousand-plus-seat theatres: "The stage lighting was always weak," noted Custance Baker, "so make up had to clear and strong."⁵⁷

In Chalker's experience, "Make-up was a more difficult matter":

Apart from the use of charcoal sticks and white tapioca flour and in the early days some ground pastel mixed with grease, red was difficult to produce or obtain. I believe that in Chungkai and in Nakhon Pathom some rouge was obtained either through Thai traders who brought up our rations on river barges or possibly from amenable and interested Jap guards.

As you can imagine this crudely made facial make-up would have only a limited life on stage where intense heat combined with perspiration could, and did, provide disastrous and hilarious effects on occasion, though it never ruined a show.⁵⁸

Charcoal or soot from the cookhouse chimney was used for lining the eyes; rice or tapioca flour as face powder. As a further source for red lipstick or rouge, small amounts of mercurochrome were sometimes available, although this antiseptic was needed in the hospitals.

The performers at Chungkai had the services of a professional makeup artist, R. Taylor, who had worked for Max Factor in Hollywood before the war.⁵⁹ Before their accommodating Japanese commandant at Tamarkan gave permission for women's face powder and lipstick to be purchased locally in Kanchanaburi,⁶⁰ Sergeant Fred Atherton, a Tasmanian pathologist, developed a range of makeup bases by mixing mosquito cream with colored artist crayons.⁶¹

The high black and white contrast in the *Wonder Bar* photographs makes it difficult to see, except in the most obvious cases, who is, or who is not, wearing makeup. The female impersonators wear eye shadow, rouge, and lipstick to heighten their allure. But most of the men do not appear to be wearing makeup, or if they are, it is a basic *corrective makeup*. Hugh de Wardener (**Figure 12.44**) seems to be wearing some sort of old-age *character makeup* with whitened hair (rice or tapioca flour), and two others sport fake-looking Hitler-type moustaches.

Costuming Challenges

The range of costumes produced by the dedicated designers and wardrobe staff in the various camps was simply astounding. But the prize for the most imaginative costumes seen in any POW show in Thailand has to be given to Puck Jonkmans and his Dutch/Indonesian wardrobe staff for *Circus Cavaliers* at Chungkai. In this show, costumes were required for the "[a]crobats, pumas, penguins and clowns [which] were mixed together with serious acts such as a legendary 'Lotus Dance.'" Chalker called it "perhaps the most ingeniously designed and constructed of any of the Chungkai theatre performances," with "superb" costumes.^{ix62}

Chalker also recalled a "singular example of construction and achievement" at Nakhon Pathom: "a two-man operated elephant made of fine woven bamboo matting." He explained, "The Elephant was part of a revue called 'The Raja [*sic*] of Cocanut.' The elephant was made of woven bamboo matting coloured grey with a mixture of wood ash and tapioca goo which had dried hard and had begun to revert back to powder."⁶³

Chalker goes on to tell about the hilarious mishap that occurred with the elephant during a matinee performance in the hot sun,^x and then concludes, "I mention this not just because of its crazy ending but because the construction of a reasonably sized elephant able to contain two men and survive considerable antics on stage without splitting apart, that worked successfully as well as looking good was a considerable achievement. It was a great day for us all."⁶⁴

The Tamarkan designers and wardrobe staff did not lag behind their counterparts in the other camps. For *The Wizard of Oz*, Frank Purtell was faced with the challenges of creating the costumes for the Cowardly Lion and the Tin Man. For the lion, he devised a "frightful skin made out of old bags, that sprouting mane of shredded rice-sacks!"⁶⁵ The Tin Man, though, presented a difficult problem that was only solved when a Petty Officer, who had survived the sinking of the *Prince of Wales*^{xi} and was constructing artificial limbs for camp amputees, stepped in and made a suitable outfit out of old tea containers.⁶⁶ For the musical revue *When Knights Were Bold*, Lieutenant George Plunket constructed a suit of medieval armor and a helmet out of tin.

ix See **Figure 6.17** in Chapter 6: "Chungkai Showcase" for a rendering of the "Lotus Dancers" costumes.

x A story told fully in Chapter 11: "Out of the Blue Came Freedom."

xi Or The Repulse. Drower was unsure.



FIGURE 12.62. COSTUME PLOT: "MUSIC HALL" CHARACTERS. RAE NIXON, AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL. COURTESY OF MRS. RAE NIXON.

For authenticity, the Cockney Costermonger outfit (at upper right) had 2,000 “mother-of-pearl” buttons made out of “C/board painted with a mixture of lime & tapioca paste” sewn onto it.⁶⁷



FIGURE 12.63. COSTUME PLOT: "LIGHTS OF LONDON" CHARACTERS. RAE NIXON.
AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL. COURTESY OF MRS. RAE NIXON.

These magnificent costumes, as well as the costuming in other shows and other places, reveal the astounding resourcefulness and skills of the POW costume designers and their wardrobe staffs—and what remarkable lengths the theatrical producers went to in order to mount these productions for the enjoyment of their audiences.

G. Musical Instrument Construction

In the musical instruments they constructed to supplement the limited number of instruments available, the POWs ingenuity and technical skills were further put to the test and succeed brilliantly.

Numerous musicians played on the Thailand-Burma railway, most of them members of the military bands sent Up Country to provide morale-boosting music for the others. But there were other musicians—professional and amateur—among the general population of officers and other ranks; men like Frankie Quinton, Han Samethini, Nico Rayer, Len Gibson, and Tom Boardman who carried their accordions, guitars, and ukuleles along with their kit. As one POW wrote, "every man who owned an instrument of any kind felt it his duty to carry it wherever he went. Saxophones, violins and guitars were carried carefully through the jungles of Thailand when every extra pound to carry was a burden out of all proportion to its actual weight."⁶⁸ Members of official military bands may have had an easier time of it, according to Tom Morris: "Well, I think that since they were actually Army instruments, and the Japanese allowed them to convey them . . . they did provide, you know, trucks [for] essential gear and some thing—that sort of stuff we'd carry on a truck."⁶⁹

Sources for Musical Instruments

Of the three sources of instruments for the musicians in the hospital and relocation camp orchestras and dance and jazz bands—those the POWs carried with them, those donated by the Red Cross, and those that were camp made—our interest is in the latter.

Camp-made Instruments. In order to have a full-fledged orchestra, dance band, or jazz ensemble with varied and balanced sound, musical instruments not available from any other source were desperately needed. Workshops were organized to construct them.

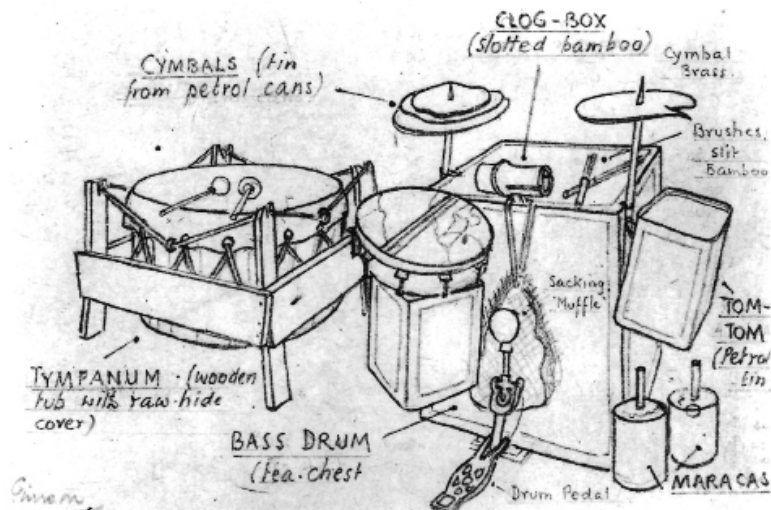


FIGURE 12.64. SKETCH OF CAMP-MADE INSTRUMENTS. STANLEY GIMSON. IWM HU_3103. COURTESY OF THE FAMILY OF STANLEY GIMSON.

Both Stanley Gimson and Wally Davis drew sketches of the instruments that were constructed at Chungkai. Gimson's sketch from early 1944 shows a large tympanum made from a wooden tub with a stretched rawhide cover suspended by cords in a scrap lumber cradle. By 1945, the original tympanum had been replaced with a hollow tree trunk and the wooden cradle by a bamboo stand. Gimson's bass drum is made from a tea chest. The drum pedal was the real thing, donated by a POW who had carried it with him since the beginning of his captivity thinking it might come in useful.⁷⁰ A muffle of rice sacking hangs in front of the pedal. Attached to the drum are a number of other instruments: a tom-tom (made from a petrol tin) hangs off the right side; two cymbals (also from petrol cans) are attached at top on either side; a clog box (slotted bamboo) sits center along with brushes made from slit bamboo. In Davis' 1945 sketch, the single clog box has become a set of temple blocks attached to the front of the drum.

Suspended on the left side of Gimson's bass drum is a side/snare drum sitting on top of another petrol tin for support (and, perhaps, added resonance). A buffalo bladder is the drum head, tightened with threaded nails for tension rods. Davis' notes on his sketch indicate that it had a "small trap door to put warm brick in to tighten head in the damp night air."⁷¹ By 1945 this snare drum had its own stand. Gimson shows two round maracas that appear to be made out of food tins. Davis also displays two maracas, but these are "made from bale fruit. Ants eat inside leaving pips."⁷² Bamboo stuck into the dried fruit created the handles.



FIGURE 12.65. SKETCH OF CAMP-MADE INSTRUMENTS. WALLY DAVIS.
HAN SAMETHINI COLLECTION. COURTESY OF ROBIN KALHORN.

Davis' sketch was drawn in the late spring of 1945 after these same instruments had been transported to Tamuang. By that point, some new instruments had been added and originals worn from use had been reconditioned. It includes several more items not seen in Gimson's: side drum brushes made from bamboo; petrol tin cymbals worked with pedals of hinged wood; band seats made from bamboo; and a bamboo and wooden music stand complete with slush lamp in a small hutch at the top that could be lit for evening concerts.

The Double Bass. But it is the large musical instrument standing at left in Davis' sketch that is most of interest: the camp-made double bass. Gimson, too, sketched this instrument, but separately, showing its front, back, and side construction.

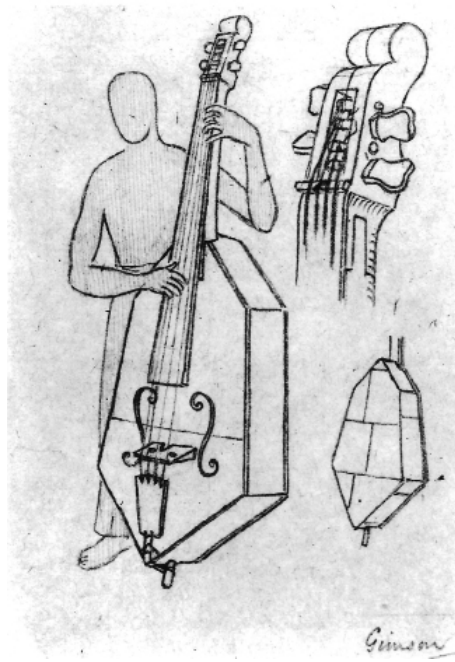


FIGURE 12.66. SKETCH OF CAMP-MADE BASS VIOL. STANLEY GIMSON. IWM HU_3105. COURTESY OF THE FAMILY OF STANLEY GIMSON.

The construction of this double bass was a singular achievement. The details of its construction, its progress toward completion, and the date of its first appearance in the orchestra were eagerly discussed in the camp. Apparently started sometime in early 1944, the construction took several months to be completed—a slow process of trial and error. A diary entry by Lieutenant W. W. Marsh provides an update on its progress: “Our local ‘workshop’ is making a double-bass violin for the concert orchestra. It is nearly finished & I hope it works. It is made entirely from old Red Cross tea-chests. The strings are twisted bullock gut wound round with fine wire.”⁷³

Two days later the double bass appeared in a musical concert at Chungkai. Captain Aylwin makes special mention of it in his diary entry recording the event: “The camp now boasts an orchestra. It consists of five violins, one double bass, two clarinets, one trumpet, two cornets, a piano accordion, a mandolin, a guitar, tympani and percussion! The double bass is home made from three-ply wood and odd screws etc., a great achievement.”⁷⁴ In Aylwin’s eyes, at least, the addition of the double bass transformed the band into an orchestra.

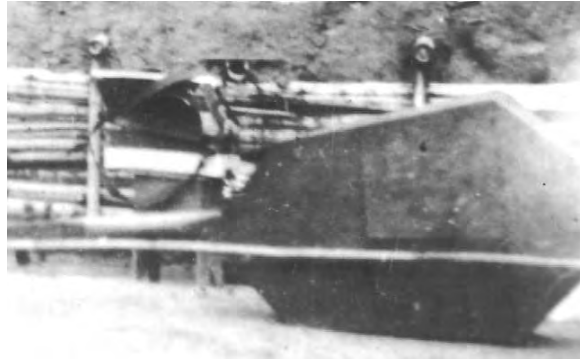


FIGURE 12.67. *Wonder Bar* DETAIL: CAMP-MADE BASS VIOL. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF MARTIN PERCIVAL.

One of the *Wonder Bar* photographs gives a view of this marvelous camp-made double bass lying on its side in the orchestra pit at Chungkai.

In “Orchestras in Captivity,” an article published shortly after repatriation, the musical conductor Eric Cliffe provided more detailed information on the double bass’s construction and tonal qualities:

The bass was manufactured in the camp from tea-chests and a log extracted from the river, and all its strings were telephone wire—which imposed a calculated strain of over two tons on the frame. Four men were required to tune the instrument: one to hold it down, another to tune the string by means of a long pronged lever fitted over the peg, a third to hold a brick against one side of the neck whilst a fourth drove home the peg with an eight-pound hammer! This bass possessed a powerful voice, its tone carrying to a distance of three hundred yards in the open air.⁷⁵

Richard Sharp’s account supplies the name of the person he believed responsible for its construction: “the work of the Camp Carpenter, Sgt. Horrocks of the Suffolk Regt., was regarded with pride and admiration. It was made out of ply wood, with a red-wood neck, strut, scroll and bridge. To make the glue strong enough for it, a dark Dutchman had to keep the cow hooves brewing for seven whole days.” Like Cliffe, he remarked on how the bass “could be heard when all the other instruments had faded in the distance, yet near at hand, it nicely added the bass to the otherwise unbalanced ensemble.”⁷⁶

Credit for this amazing achievement should not be given solely to Sergeant Horrocks. It had required the the efforts of three men, each contributing his special knowledge and skills. A caption attached to Gimson’s sketch of the double bass notes that it was made by “Sergeant G. [‘Bill’] Bainbridge of the 2nd Gordon Highlanders and Sergeant R. Jansen of the Dutch Army.” Bainbridge was the musician who would play the instrument; Jansen may be the “dark Dutchmen” mentioned in Sharp’s account above, although Joop Postma credits “an Eurasian boy named Liddel” with this accomplishment.⁷⁷

From the numerous accounts of the instruments played in the various POW musical ensembles in Thailand, it is clear that more than one of these double basses were constructed in the camps.

Double-bass “Jungle Style.” A more simply constructed type of bass viol can be seen in Nixon’s

sketch of Tony Gerrish's dance band at Tamarkan, where it is identified as "Base [sic] (Jungle Style)."

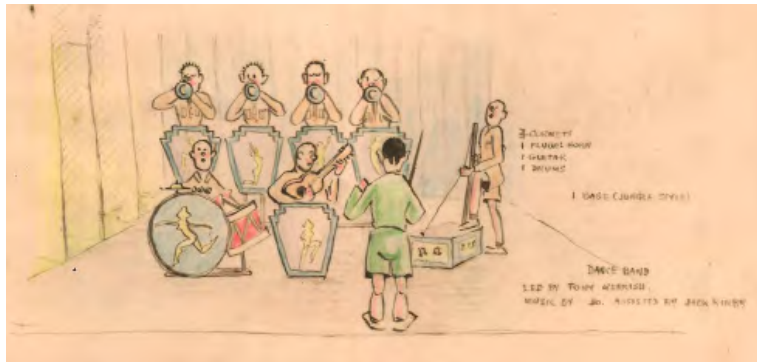


FIGURE 12.68. TONY GERRISH'S DANCE BAND." SKETCHBOOK DETAIL. RAE NIXON. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL. COURTESY OF MRS. RAE NIXON.

None of the camp-made bass viols could be bowed; they could only be plucked.

Other Musical Instruments

The Violin. In his "Orchestras" article, Cliffe records the construction of another musical instrument, this time at Kanburi Officers' Camp: "One of the fiddles was made from tea-chests, a piece of aeroplane glass (for the tail-piece), telephone wire (for the E string), and the bow was haired with shredded hemp rope which had been boiled previously for twenty-four hours; yet this instrument had a richer tone than the Red Cross fiddles which the camp had so gratefully received at an earlier date."⁷⁸

The Ukulele. POWs not associated with the orchestra also got into the musical instrument construction business. When amateur musician Tom Boardman returned to Chungkai in early 1944 after the railway was completed, he set to work to make himself a new and larger ukulele out of scavenged scrap lumber and signal wire.⁷⁹

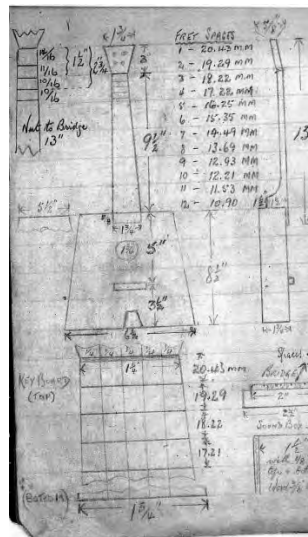


FIGURE 12.69. SKETCH OF UKULELE CONSTRUCTION. TOM BOARDMAN. COURTESY OF TOM BOARDMAN.

Boardman's construction diagram shows careful measurements for each section of the ukulele and placement of the frets. The "gears" used to tighten the strings—salvaged from a smashed mandolin found on a working party back in Changi, Singapore—were transferred from his old ukulele to his new one. Boardman played his new ukulele in hut concerts at Chungkai and later in camp shows at Kachu Mountain.

* * *

Theatres, sets, lights, costumes, props, musical instruments—all the material artifacts needed to produce the POWs' music and theatre—were re-created from memory. Through their creative imagination, ingenuity, and skill, the designers and technicians kept alive a world that was otherwise quickly fading from consciousness.

Endnotes

- 1 Tom Boardman, Interview, 34–35.
- 2 Chippington, 148.
- 3 Chalker, BRA, 96.
- 4 Mullineux, 22.
- 5 Durnford, 145.
- 6 Jacobs, 117–118.
- 7 Milford, Diary, 9 April 1944.
- 8 Johnston, 113.
- 9 Mullineux, 22.
- 10 Johnston, 113.
- 11 Coast, 186–187.
- 12 Coast, 183–184, 186.
- 13 Owtram, 105.
- 14 Allison, Letter, 24 August 2001.
- 15 Owtram, 109.
- 16 Wilbur Smith, Note C.
- 17 Wilbur Smith, Telephone Interview, 12 May 2004.
- 18 Pritchard, "the undefeated," 5.
- 19 Mullineux, 22.
- 20 De Wardener, Interview, 25–26.
- 21 Ingram, 2.
- 22 Harris, 133–134.
- 23 Coast, 175.
- 24 Chalker, Letter, 2 March 2000.
- 25 Coast, 177.
- 26 Owtram, 104.
- 27 Chalker, Letter, 24 July 2000.
- 28 Jacobs, 113.
- 29 Jacobs, 118.
- 30 Chalker, Letter, 23 June 2003.
- 31 Durnford, 145.
- 32 Nixon, Sketchbook.
- 33 Coast, 186.
- 34 Chalker, Letter, 2 March 2000.

- 35 Baker, "Extracts from A Memoir," 17.
- 36 Anckorn, 60.
- 37 Baker, "Extracts from a Memoir," 14.
- 38 Patsy Adams-Smith, quoting Chalker, 431.
- 39 Trans. by Margie Bellamy.
- 40 Jacobs, 118.
- 41 Patsy Adams-Smith, quoting Chalker, 431.
- 42 Nixon, Sketchbook, SK-16.
- 43 Nixon, Sketchbook, SK-11.
- 44 Nixon, Sketchbook, SK-11.
- 45 Quote combined from two sources: Chalker, Letter, 24 July 2000; Patsy Adams-Smith quoting Chalker, 431.
- 46 Carter, 172.
- 47 PIX, 9 February 1946, 16.
- 48 Jacobs, 118.
- 49 Nixon, Sketchbook, SK-7.
- 50 Chalker, Letter, 2 March 2000.
- 51 Chalker, Letter, 2 March 2000.
- 52 PIX, 9 February 1946, 17.
- 53 Nixon, Sketchbook, SK-10.
- 54 Nixon, Sketchbook, SK-16.
- 55 PIX, 9 February 1946, 17.
- 56 Leffelaar & van Witsen, 257; trans. by Sheri Tromp.
- 57 Baker, "Extracts from A Memoir," 17.
- 58 Chalker, Letter, 2 March 2000.
- 59 Coast, 170.
- 60 Jacobs, 117–118.
- 61 PIX, 9 February 1946, 16.
- 62 Chalker, Letter, 2 March 2000.
- 63 Chalker, Letter, 2 March 2000.
- 64 Chalker, Letter, 2 March 2000.
- 65 Carter, 169.
- 66 Drower, Letter, 1 May 2004.
- 67 PIX, 9 February 1946, 16.
- 68 Anonymous IWM 95/9/1, 44.
- 69 Tom Morris, Interview, 5.
- 70 Entry in the caption on the photograph, IWM Photographic Collection: HU3103.
- 71 Davis, "P.O.W. Musical Products Ltd. Thailand."
- 72 Davis, "P.O.W. Musical Products Ltd. Thailand."
- 73 Marsh, Diary, 8 March 1944, 194.
- 74 Aylwin, IWM 67/330/1, Folder 7, 13.
- 75 Cliffe, "Orchestra in Captivity," 5.
- 76 Richard Sharp, 50.
- 77 Leffelaar & van Witsen, 249; trans. by Sheri Tromp.
- 78 Cliffe, "Orchestras," 5.
- 79 Tom Boardman, "Comments and Answers to Questions," 3.

Chapter 13: “Precious Personalities”

The Entertainment Producers

Being entertainers in the hospital and relocation base camps in Thailand carried enormous prestige and gave the performers celebrity status. John Cosford called those at Chungkai the “Chungkai stars.”¹ Basil Peacock went even further, anointing them “the aristocrats of the camp, being looked upon as precious personalities.”² Both Cosford and Peacock are referring to the performers they saw onstage weekly. Similar sentiments could be heard in other camps about their entertainers.

Behind the scenes were the musical and choral conductors and the theatrical directors, who got less attention but were also acknowledged as “wonderfully talented.”³ These were the entertainment producers—the orchestra conductors, choral directors, and theatrical producer-directors—men whose talents, training, and experience, as well as personnel and organizational skills, created shows that turned performers into “stars.” This group of “precious personalities” will be honored here.

Though many men had produced musical and theatrical shows in their initial POW camps and later Up Country during the railway construction, only the activities of entertainment producers in the base hospital and relocation camps in Thailand during 1944–45 will be acknowledged below.ⁱ Keeping thousands of men entertained weekly with new and exciting shows in camps was an enormous challenge to their energies and creative abilities.

Orchestra Conductors

The major band or orchestra conductors in these camps were Bill Bainbridge (Chungkai), Eric Cliffe (Chungkai, Tamuang, Kanburi Officers’ Camp), “Ace” Connolly (Chungkai, Nong Pladuk), Tony Gerrish (Tamarkan), T. Gray (Nakhon Pathom), Gus Harffey (Chungkai, Kanburi Hospital Camp, Kanburi Officers’ Camp), Ernest Lenthall (Chungkai), Norman Smith (Chungkai, Tamuang, Nakhon Pathom, Kanburi Officers’ Camp), and Norman Whittaker (Tamarkan).



FIGURE 13.1. NORMAN WHITTAKER'S BRASS BAND AT TAMARKAN. RAE NIXON. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL. COURTESY OF MRS. RAE NIXON.

ⁱ Unfortunately, this excludes the marvelous construction camp producers like director Charles Woodhams and conductor Reginald Nixon. Wim Kan gets his due in Chapter 8: “Breakout”

Most of these men were professionally trained, and the music they played was primarily popular, including swing. A few conductors (Smith, Lenthall) included light classical music in their repertoire. Eric Cliffe was the sole conductor of classical music concerts, and it was noted with much appreciation that he singlehandedly “saved the captivity for classical musicians.”⁴ All of them conducted pit orchestras for the theatrical offerings.

Choral Directors

Lesser known were the choral directors. These men were usually involved in organizing choirs for religious services, but on certain occasions they took part in orchestral concerts or, like *The Christmas Spirit* performed at Chungkai in 1944, presented full choral concerts. The few names of choral directors we know are Gibby S. Inglefield (Chungkai), A. P. A. Clemens (Chungkai?), T. Gray (Nakhon Pathom), and Norman Halliday (Tamarkan).

Theatrical Directors

The theatrical directors had, perhaps, the most difficult task in providing entertainment for the POWs, as they had to create shows from what could be remembered of what they had seen on stage or in film or heard on the radio. Songs and comic sketches had to be recalled or written anew; for the pantomimes and musical comedies, complete scripts had to be drawn from memory. Some scripts for straight plays were available, brought Up Country from Singapore; others had to be remembered and reconstructed. A few original revues, musical comedies, and mystery-thrillers were written, such as Bob Gale’s musical *Escapado Argentino* at Nong Pladuk.

Creating these productions was undoubtedly a group effort, with everyone contributing his recollections, but it was up to the producer-director to develop the final product and work with the designers and technicians to articulate a production concept. And then, of course, men needed to be found who could perform the material and the whole show rehearsed so that “it’ll be alright on the night.”ⁱⁱ

The major theatrical producer-directors in the hospital and relocation camps were John D. V. Allum (Chungkai, Nong Pladuk), Leo Britt (Chungkai), Norman Carter (Tamarkan), Eddie Edwins (Chungkai), Bob Gale (Nong Pladuk), David Gregg and John Lovell (Kanburi Hospital Camp), Jim Jacobs (Tamarkan), Wim Kan (Nakhon Pathom), “Fizzer” Pearson (Chungkai, Nakhon Pathom), Joop Postma (Chungkai, Tamuang), John “Nellie” Wallace (Chungkai), and Nigel Wright (Chungkai, Nakhon Pathom).

Nearly all these men specialized in one or two types of entertainment, but Lieutenant John D. V. Allum produced the whole range of entertainment possibilities. Allum had no formal training or experience in professional theatre and first discovered his talents as a producer in 1942 as officer in charge of a work-site concert party in Keppel Harbour, Singapore. Later, as entertainments officer in Nong Pladuk, he was responsible for all the shows produced in the camp. Though he did not personally direct each one, of the twenty-nine shows produced there between Christmas 1943 and January 1945 (the majority of which were variety and revues), Allum staged at least twenty-two of them—a staggering achievement.ⁱⁱⁱ (To read a letter of appreciation to Allum from Dutch Army Captain B. Sluimers, who was officer-in-charge of the N.E.I. concert party in Nong Pladuk’s Camp No. 2, see **Figure 13.2** in the Image Gallery.)

ⁱⁱ *Common encouragement given amateur British entertainers* [Richards, Dick. *Canteen Capers! Sketches for Military Concert Parties* (London: Samuel French Limited, 1943), 4].

ⁱⁱⁱ *Many of them with assistant producer Noel Woods.*

Production Practices

Unfortunately, we know little about how the musical or theatrical producer-directors went about developing, rehearsing, and/or staging their shows.

But Norman Pritchard and Fergus Anckorn recalled the production practices under Allum where scripts for comic sketches were developed and rehearsed while the performers were on working parties. Pritchard, who sometimes worked outside the camp on “heavy duty” details, wrote, “It was possible, with some effort to work for ten, or twelve, or even more hours, with poor food, little to drink in very difficult circumstances on a monotonous, soul-destroying job, and still be able to think about plans for a concert, or a talk, or a discussion. A great deal of preparation was done on working parties.”⁵

Anckorn described how these rough scenarios were rehearsed while working on “light duty” details inside the camp.

Some of us were in camp during the day, and we'd rehearse what had to be rehearsed.

“You come in with the guns and do this. You say, ‘Dropa ze gunsa.’”

“And then what?”

“Well, let's do this?”

And then we'd write it down, in rough form. And then when they'd got it in rough form, we've got a sort of story . . . there was always a girl in it, usually Basil Ferron . . . and they would tidy up the script. And then, those who had the opportunity would learn it.

If it couldn't be written down, it was rehearsed verbally. Nothing was exact. You said what you had to say as well as you could say it, so long as that went all right. . . . But we kept within the main script of the thing. And it all worked very well. And when we performed it, it was to huge applause everywhere, because it was the one highlight of the week . . . and it sort of grew together just by everyone doing their bit.⁶

Anckorn went on to describe what happened when a roughly sketched scenario did *not* “grow together” as planned during a performance:

And if there was a piece in this script which wasn't gelling too well, they would get me, for instance, in the play to [suddenly appear from the wings and say.]

“Stop! Stop! Say, have you seen this trick?” And I would do a few tricks and then we'd catch up to the script again.

But they were very well received and people used to look forward to them. And when I think back, I find it very difficult to remember how we did rehearse them all. Because on the night of every show, it went like clockwork.⁷

Fully scripted musicals, on the other hand, like *Escapado Argentino*, were the creation of a single playwright.

In contrast to the amateur producers, Norman Carter and Leo Britt had both been involved in professional theatre before the war (Carter as an actor-producer in Australia, Britt as an actor in England) and brought the values and practices of that experience with them. They both had high regard for “production values”—the theatrical elements that make performances visually exciting—and were notorious for challenging their design and technical staffs to produce extraordinary sets, costumes, lighting, and props for their productions.^{iv}

The major difference between them lay in their work with actors. At Tamarkan, Carter produced only book-revues, musicals, and pantomimes—theatrical forms with simple plotlines and stereotypical characters, so his rehearsals with actors were minimal. He expected them to be “letter perfect”^v for the first rehearsal when he blocked the show^{vi}—the mark of a director who is used to working with professional actors and not one who intends to spend time coaching actors about their craft. He also was forced to operate within very strict regulations that limited the length of his rehearsals. Nevertheless, Carter produced a marvelous set of shows at Tamarkan, earning praise from Albert Coates, the senior medical officer on the railway:

His drive, initiative, raw wit and histrionic talent combined with indomitable spirit were the ingredients which made him such a wonderful entrepreneur. His story deserves a place in the archives of Australian accomplishments in World War II.⁹

At Chungkai, Britt produced all types of theatre. Most prized were the series of straight plays he produced in the fall of 1944 and early spring of 1945. Plays demand more rehearsal time with actors and careful attention to complex character and plot development. As a former actor, Britt was able to translate his stage experience into training and rehearsal procedures for his amateur performers and stage managers. Since there are numerous accounts in the POW literature about his theatrical productions, as well as his out-sized personality, coaching methods, and rehearsal techniques, it is the extraordinary Leo Britt who becomes the main focus of this chapter.

“Maestro” Leo Britt

According to his official Japanese locator card, Leo Ernest Britt was born on 27 March 1908 in Westminster, London, which would make him one of the older men among the thousands of other rank soldiers taken prisoner at Singapore. Prior to his capture, Britt had been a corporal in the Royal Army Service Corps serving in Malaya under Singapore Fortress Command. On his locator card he listed his pre-war occupation as “theatrical agent,” instead of actor, which may have been his attempt to avoid being singled out by the Japanese to serve their propaganda purposes as other POW actors had been.^{vii}

^{iv} See Chapter 5: “The Tamarkan Players Present,” Chapter 6: “Chungkai Showcase,” and Chapter 12: “Jolly Good Show!” for examples of these high production values in staging.

^v With all lines memorized.

^{vi} To be fair, Carter was severely hampered at Tamarkan by the rehearsal restrictions placed on him by a hostile Japanese commandant (see Chapter 5: “The Tamarkan Players Present”), whereas, at Chungkai, Britt had the advantage of a commandant who strongly supported the POW entertainment.

^{vii} See Weary Dunlop’s diary about the fate of Australian actor Clephan “Tinkle” Bell on Java in 1942.

Prewar Resume

Before his enlistment, Leo Britt had been an actor in London's West End theatre, albeit, according to Captain C. D. L. Aylwin, only in minor roles.¹⁰ What is known about his prewar acting resume is very sketchy. One show he performed in was André Charlot's 1929 production of *Wonder Bar*.

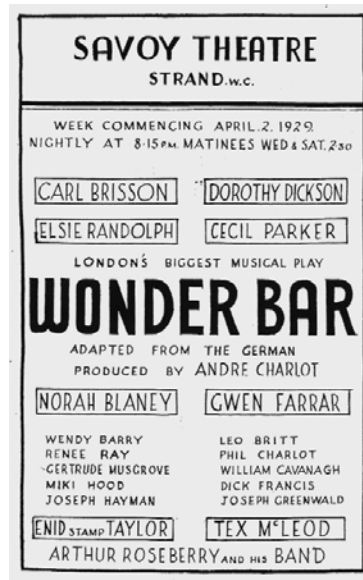


FIGURE 13.3. POSTER FOR ANDRÉ CHARLOT'S *Wonder Bar*. COURTESY OF JOHN SHARP.

The show's poster confirms that Britt was not one of the leads in the production. Terry Morris recalled that he was, instead, an actor-dancer in the show, performing "a tango specialty to the tune, 'Tell me I'm forgiven.'"¹¹

When Britain declared war on Germany in 1939, Britt was in the touring production of Lupino and Eyton's musical comedy *Runaway Love*.¹² He enlisted in the Royal Army Service Corps, which was desperate for transport drivers and allowed men Britt's age to join the unit. Like Fergus Anckorn and Denis East of the Optimists, who were also transport drivers, this position may have allowed him to perform in concert parties as well.

When Britt's military unit arrived in Malaya is not known, but between 27 September and 11 October 1941 he appeared onstage at the Victoria Theatre in Singapore in Beryl Coles' production of Barré Lyndon's *The Amazing Dr. Clitterhouse* for a local theatre group known as "The Island Committee."



FIGURE 13.4. PRODUCTION STILL FROM *THE AMAZING DR. CLITTERHOUSE*. LEO BRITT ON THE RIGHT. COURTESY OF LEOFRIC THORPE.

Major Leofric Thorpe, stage manager for this production, was an important figure in the Island Committee organization, and it may have been Thorpe who recruited Britt, as he had other soldiers, for the group's shows.

POW Resume: Changi

Because of his association with Thorpe, Britt was able to parlay his professional experience into a major role as producer with "The Southern Area Troops Central Concert Party" organized by Thorpe in the Singapore Fortress section of Changi POW camp soon after surrender. Here Britt would discover his métier as a producer-director.



FIGURE 13.5. E & O GREEN ROOM CLUB MEMBERSHIP CARD. COURTESY OF LEOFRIC THORPE.

At the same time as the concert party was getting organized and rehearsals for the first show were under way, Britt founded the E & O^{viii} Green Room Club to promote activities of a theatrical nature.^{ix} Besides Britt, the club had seven other founding members, five of whom would become well-known producers in the entertainment world of the Thailand-Burma railway.^x

Britt's first production in Changi was the "new laughing revusical" *Red, White, and Blue*, which opened on 14 April 1942.¹³

Each of the Southern Area shows ran for a month in order to allow all the local troops to see it on a unit rotation basis. For May, Britt produced *Hellsabuzzin'!*, which Thorpe claimed was Britt's rewrite of *Runaway Love* with topical references.¹⁴



FIGURE 13.6. PROGRAM FOR *HELLSABUZZIN'!*. D. W. JENKINS
IWM 65/144/1.

With this second show, the Southern Area Central Concert Party changed its name to the more appealing "Mumming Bees."

When it became evident that one show a month would not fill the need for entertainment to keep morale up, Britt produced a small cast revue entitled *Café Colette* that toured Southern Area locations during the week. As the band leader in the show, he played a character called "Maestro," and this became his moniker—one he preferred others use when addressing him.

viii *Eastern and Oriental Express*—the famous railway line that still runs between Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and Bangkok, Thailand.

ix According to Thorpe, "The Green Room Club was really nothing more than a list which Leo made out of all who might have joined it. Though all those whom we could contact agreed that they were members, and this was most of them" [Thorpe, Letter to Laurie Allison, n.d.]. Miss Marie Ney, a British stage and film star who had recently been in Malaya, was designated as the club's patron.

x These men represent different military units and/or concert parties: Bradshaw (18th Division's New Windmill Players), McNaughton and Wood (A.I.F. Concert Party), Thorpe, Smith, and Harfey (Singapore Fortress Command's Mumming Bees), and Nigel Wright (F.M.S.V.F.). On the reverse side of Leo Britt's membership card are lists of fifteen professional and 109 amateur British, Australian, American, and Dutch/Indonesian "actors in the Far East" that more accurately should read "performers," as some of these are names of musicians. This list must have been compiled by Britt in 1944, as it includes performers he knew on the Thailand-Burma railway as well as in Changi but excludes those he met in 1945. Among the notable omissions of men Britt must have known in Chungkai are the Englishman Dudley Gotla and the Dutch/Indonesian Philip Brugman.

Britt did not produce the Mumming Bees' show for June. But he didn't allow himself to be forgotten. On the back side of the program for that revue appeared an announcement for his upcoming production of *Wonder Bar*.

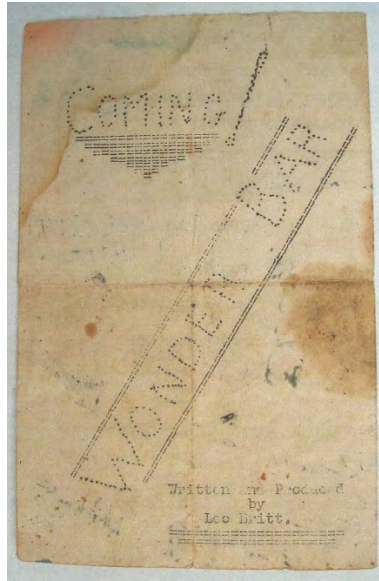


FIGURE 13.7. ANNOUNCEMENT FOR *Wonder Bar*.
COURTESY OF JOHN POLLOCK.

As the need for more and more entertainment spread throughout the vast populace of POWs, it was decided that Mumming Bees' shows should run for two months instead of one so that POWs in other areas might see them as well. So Britt abandoned his plans for a production of *Wonder Bar* and produced, instead, another large-scale revue, *Pass the Nuts*, which would run for July and August.

During the infamous "Selarang Incident" in September, when the Japanese authorities herded all the "fit" Changi POWs into the Australians' Selarang Barracks square to coerce them into signing a no-escape agreement, Britt delighted the thousands jammed into the square by mounting "a few 'turns' on the back of a farm cart" by Mumming Bees performers.¹⁵

Afterwards, when Britt learned that he was among the Singapore Fortress POWs who were going to be sent to Thailand to construct a railway, he remounted his production of *Pass the Nuts* as the Mumming Bees' farewell production. Britt left Changi for Thailand with other members of the concert party in early November.

POW Resume: Thailand—Early Days

Leo Britt's first theatrical production in Thailand was *Rhythm on the River*, given at Chungkai on Christmas Day 1942. John Sharp attended the evening performance:

Went to concert at 7.30. Stage had been erected under a big tree in clearing. Audience on floor [ground]. Quite a good show. Orchestra of five with

“maestro,”^{xi} two female impersonators, two close harmonists, and a conjurer.^{xii} Nips present appeared to enjoy show. Puss-in-boots^{xiii} said he did very much. Female impersonators well-dressed—brought small wardrobe from Changi. At 9 p.m. lights did not appear as arranged,^{xiv} and audience dispersed, but met lights as we returned, so reassembled and saw rest of show.¹⁶

(*Rhythm on the River* sounds very much like a variation on Britt’s earlier *Café Colette* show.)

Early in the new year, Britt was posted to the forward field hospital camp at Takanun, where his theatrical talents could be useful in keeping up the men’s morale.

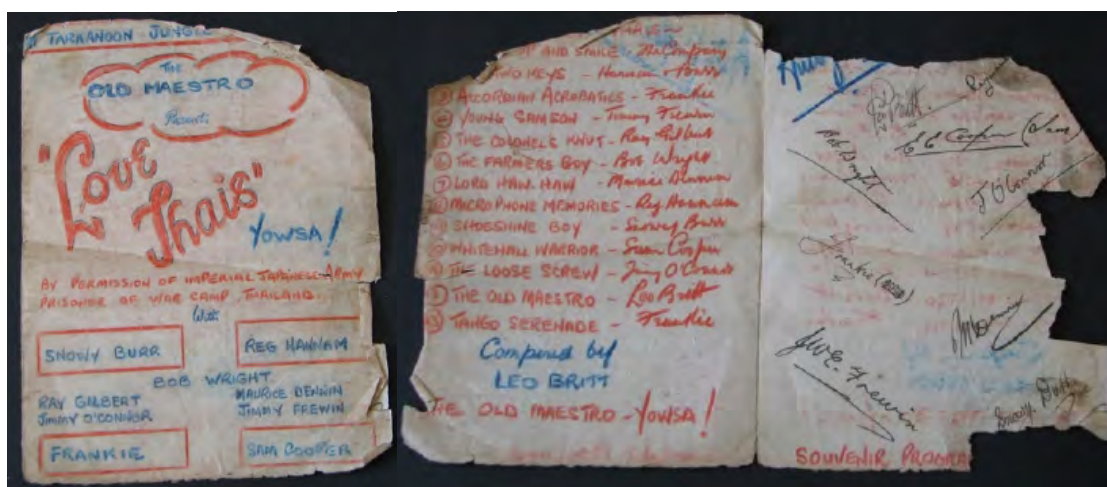


FIGURE 13.8. PROGRAM COVER FOR *LOVE THAIS*. FIGURE 13.9. PLAYBILL FOR *LOVE THAIS*, TAKANUN, 1943. COURTESY OF REGINALD HANNAM, JR.

Exactly when Britt produced the variety show *Love Thais* at “Takanoon” [Takanun] is not known, but it was most likely before “the Speedo” took effect in March 1943. In October, after the two halves of the railway were joined, Britt, along with Lieutenant Gus Harffey, received permission to form “The Takanun Players” and build the “Beach Pavilion Theatre.” During the next four months, they produced several highly successful theatrical productions (see Chapter 4: “The Interval”).

POW Resume: Chungkai Hospital Camp

Leo Britt’s greatest success as a producer-director came after he arrived back in Chungkai from Takanun in the spring of 1944. One of his earliest triumphs was the production of the long-delayed *Wonder Bar* in May 1944.

^{xi} In his reminiscences, W. G. Riley mistakenly identified this “maestro” as Norman Smith, but during Christmas 1942 Smith was up the line in Kanyu.

^{xii} The conjurer has been identified by the magician Fergus Anckorn—who was recovering in Chungkai at the time from the burns he received at Wampo—as a former Malayan planter by the name of Openshaw.

^{xiii} POW nickname for one of their Korean guards.

^{xiv} These were not electric lights but most likely kerosene pressure lamps borrowed from the Japanese.



FIGURE 13.10. POSTER FOR *Wonder Bar*.
COURTESY OF JOHN SHARP.

This poster for *Wonder Bar*—an exact duplicate of the original for the West End production (see **Figure 13.3**), except that all the original actors have been replaced with Chungkai “stars”—could only have been devised by Britt, who knew both sets of performers.

With this production, Britt himself achieved “star” status. Ian Mackintosh was voicing the general sentiment in the camp regarding Britt when he declared, “This fellow Britt is obviously a genius.”¹⁷ His “genius” was also recognized by the Japanese commandant who relieved Britt of all other camp duties so he could plan and rehearse his productions.¹⁸ Laurie Allison observed the “maestro” luxuriating in his special status:

He would lay on the bamboo slats in his hut and would be writing on his clipboard and when a Jap sauntered through the hut, Leo would acknowledge his presence with a nod of his head. Unlike we mortals who, if we failed to jump up and bow or salute, would receive a vicious slap. I think it was the Japs’ way of paying tribute to an artist.¹⁹

Between March 1944 and March 1945, Britt produced and directed fifteen different shows in Chungkai—shows that involved the whole range of theatrical forms, from pantomime to serious drama (more fully documented in Chapter 6: “Chungkai Showcase”). Many of these shows were performed by his “Chungkai Repertory Company,” which is examined later.

In February 1945, Britt was in final rehearsals with his sixteenth production, Sutton Vane’s *Outward Bound*, when a new Japanese camp commandant declared the theatre closed and ordered all the officers transferred to Kanburi. When the theatre was allowed to reopen under new restrictions preventing words from being spoken on stage, Britt volunteered for the next draft of workers for the new aerodrome

construction camp at Kachu Mountain, where there were no such constraints.

For the next four months, Britt produced shows for the White Pagoda Players at Kachu Mountain. One of his first was *Outward Bound*, remounted with an all-new cast. But a changing Japanese command made it increasingly difficult for Britt to produce shows in Kachu Mountain. Following the third cancellation of his production of *Runaway Love*, Britt volunteered, along with a cadre of his performers, for transfer to Nakhon Nai, where he hoped opportunities might be better. There he produced further shows, one of which was Dudley Gotla's victory concert *Hold That Thaiger*.

Leo Britt Offstage

Who was this man recognized by others as “the camp impresario”?²⁰



FIGURE 13.11. LEO BRITT. DETAIL OF *WONDER BAR* PHOTOGRAPH. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF MARTIN PERCIVAL.

Many POWs commented on the presence of this unique and sometimes contentious “precious personality” in their midst. Parading around camp in his blue knit cap, camp-made clogs, and pink Jap-Happy, Britt displayed a commanding presence that turned some people off—mainly officers. One of his critics was Lieutenant Richard Sharp, who said of him, “tho’ a somewhat trying personality to deal with, [he] was an efficient producer.”²¹ Even one of his top actors, Hugh de Wardener, who admired him greatly, spoke of him as “not a very pleasant character”²² and “not a warm character,” but quickly went on to say that he was “totally dedicated to what he was doing in the theatre. There was no question about that.”²³

What non-theatre people didn’t understand was that Britt’s drive to present top-notch productions meant that he frequently had to badger others to get what he wanted, caging every scrap of the scarce resources (cardboard, mosquito netting, rice sacks, bamboo matting, etc.) to make sure his designers and technicians had the materials they needed so his productions would be the best.

But Australian producer Lieutenant Norman Carter understood immediately. He first met Britt soon after his transfer to Chungkai from Tamarkan at the beginning of 1944, when he went one day to

inspect the theatre:

I was trying out the [prop piano] pedals which actually worked, when a voice called: “You want something?” and I knew instinctively that I was in the presence of Private [*sic*] Leo Britt, Chungkai’s resident producer. In spite of his patched shorts and hand-knitted blue woolen beret, there was no mistaking his profession. I could picture Mr. Britt in a morning coat and striped pants lounging in an armchair at the Green Room Club flipping over the pages of a new play, while the sweating author sat opposite waiting for the verdict: “Sorry, old boy, it simply doesn’t appeal.”

As I introduced myself he gave me a look which implied, “How did you get past the stage doorkeeper,” and then said icily: “Oh, yes. . . . You’ve been putting on a few concerts at Tamarkan.” Concerts! Resisting the urge to slap him down, I asked mildly if I could look over the theatre and again I got that suspicious glare. Mr. Britt was antagonistic, not to me personally, but because he could sniff opposition—a rival cockerel who at any minute would start flapping his wings and crowing. I could see him chewing over my request and I chuckled inwardly for I knew exactly what his reply would be—“Sorry, I’m a little busy just now.”

I did not blame him. To Mr. Britt I was another Hank Bretano,^{xv} trying to horn in on the delightful theatre which would never have reached such a pitch of excellence without his professional knowledge.²⁴

Graphic artist Geoffrey Gee, who had the task of creating posters for “the Maestro’s” shows at Chungkai, left three brief diary accounts of his meetings with Britt that provide further insight into Britt’s personality and relationships with other people:

19 June ’44. Whilst there [at the box office] in the afternoon seeing Mr. Thwaites [regarding posters for upcoming shows], I met the amazing Leo (Britt) for the first time and came under his influence!

24 September ’44. Box-office, noon, for dope for next poster “The Amazing Dr. Clitterhouse” and saw Leo Britt’s scrapbook whilst I was there.^{xvi}

24 October ’44. Box Office. Small poster for “Youth at the Helm” for publicity. Leo came down but didn’t like it too much—“Not the same colours as used in the London advertising!” Ha! Ha!²⁵

When they first met, Lieutenant John Coast and Corporal Leo Britt “instinctively disliked one

^{xv} An American who usurped Carter’s position as producer in *Bicycle Camp*, Java, with shows of his own.

^{xvi} Like most theatre people, Britt kept a scrapbook that contained copies of show posters, photographs, and clippings of reviews of shows he had appeared in. John Cosford noted that the female impersonator Bobby Spong did the same: “He kept a folder of ‘cuttings’ which told of his appearances on stage and for every show made out a programme with his own name on top of the bill” [Cosford, 104].

another,” and Coast couldn’t understand why Britt wanted him to be his assistant stage manager.²⁶ But Britt knew a good stage manager when he saw one and wasn’t about to let his personal likes or dislikes stand in the way.

Coast’s description of a theatre committee meeting gives us another snapshot of Leo Britt’s behavior offstage: “Leo always had some objective or other, and we’d wait patiently for the clouds to disperse until he eventually came to his point, and then the argument would commence.”²⁷

But these are views of Britt from people who had to deal with him about theatrical matters—matters in which the quality of his productions were at stake and, thus, relationships in which Britt believed he had to assert his authority as a “professional.” A very different opinion of Britt comes from the musician Tom Boardman, who got to know him more personally at Kachu Mountain. “Leo Britt became our friend,” he wrote.²⁸

*And offstage, he was a different man, really. If you went in [his hut], he was just like one of the lads, when you went in the hut where we was billeted. . . . And he just gonna chat like we’re chatting now, that thing sorta. I mean the profession of acting was rarely mentioned. You talked about every other thing.*²⁹

It was Coast who summed up the POWs’ response to Britt: “His friends said that he was a genuine artist, a great asset to the camp, and his temperament, unavoidable; his enemies called him an egotistical fellow of little depth; and the Theatre attitude was to ignore his temperament, and let him get on with producing.”³⁰

Britt: The Producer-Director

Acting Coach

Since most of Britt’s actors were new to theatre (although some had amateur experience), he was faced with the formidable task of training these men in the mysteries of acting as well as directing them in a show. Leofric Thorpe believed Britt “was remarkable at teaching amateurs.”³¹ An added complication was the fact that many of these actors were officers. In the hidebound hierarchical military where one’s rank, and thus one’s status, was everything, a corporal telling a captain or major what to do could be seen as insubordination and grounds for being put on a charge—and possibly a court martial.

For years the tradition in the British military had been that when officers and other ranks worked together in a concert party, rank was to make no difference, only talent. Not everyone outside the concert parties understood this tradition or could deal with it, but Britt’s adherence to that principle was complete. To illustrate this point, Anckorn gave voice to Britt’s unstated behavior: “I am the Producer, and you may be an Officer, but I’m Leo Britt.”³²

Two men observed Britt in his role as acting coach dealing with this problem—as well as others—in his handling of untrained actors. One was Tom Boardman, who watched Britt’s rehearsals at Kachu Mountain:

He would take the officer class of actor under his wing and really dominate them. He was a dominating character. Knew what he wanted. If they couldn't do it, he'd show them how to do it and how he wanted it to be done, shall I say. And in the end, he finished up with some really professional shows. . . . He brought out to the novice, as you were, a perfectional [sic] standard. He was really brilliant, in my opinion. . . . He knew if they weren't playing it as he thought it should be played, he wouldn't hesitate and say, "Oh, no, no, no, no, not that way! No, do it this way," you know. And he brought out the best in people.³³

To illustrate what he was talking about, Boardman described one telling moment he witnessed during a rehearsal:

But I remember watching—it seemed a bit stupid really. One of these plays . . . a chap would have to get out of bed and get dressed, and he had virtually forgotten how to get dressed. And Leo [Britt] would say, "Here you go, you put your trousers on, you tuck your shirt in, and all that . . . on like that"—[Leo] had to show him how to go through the routine of getting out of bed and getting dressed, 'cause he'd virtually forgotten. . . . He was only expected to do it in mime. He hadn't any trousers to put on [Laughs]; no shirt to put on. But [Britt] had to go through it with him to show him what he wanted on that.³⁴

Audio



13.1

But even Boardman had to admit, "Some [actors] could not accept his demand for high quality and, of course, fell by the wayside."³⁵

The other observer was Lieutenant-Colonel Selby Milner at Chungkai. As a non-theatre person, he had become fascinated with the whole theatrical enterprise:

[Britt] is a hard-working, cheerful and enthusiastic fellow and to see him at the rehearsals in the forest, as I did once or twice, gave me a very good idea of his personality. He was often at it from just after breakfast, often until after supper time with short pauses for lunch and tea. He seemed to know the whole thing off by heart, and was all the time exercising tact in controlling his leading players (some of whom he says get rather temperamental after one or two appearances on the stage) and exercising the force of his personality to put some drive into the rather less expert material in the smaller parts. In this way he was to be seen sometimes standing in the front of the rehearsal stage controlling all the players, and sometimes standing beside one of them and singing a song or doing a dance with him. He was in fact the driving force behind the whole business.³⁶

From Rehearsal to Performance

More detailed information regarding Britt's actor coaching and rehearsal procedures comes from cast members.

First Rehearsals

"To be directed by Leo Brit," said Hugh de Wardener "was quite something, particularly at first. . . I remember the first reading."

At first we were all sort of automatons, you know. But by the third, fourth, or fifth play that you were involved in, the first reading was exciting.

I mean Leo Britt would say, "You're going to be this. And you're that. And I want you to be this, that, and the other, fine." Gives us the general tone to these various [scenes] and people. And then, boom, you're in. Straightaway!³⁷

Norman Carter, who was cast by Britt as the old woman in *Outward Bound*, recalled the first rehearsal with the cast on its feet moving around in the outline of the set marked out on the ground with whitewashed stones:

Conducted in an almost ecclesiastical atmosphere, that first rehearsal was an eye-opener. No standing to attention while a funeral cortege passed, no dodging behind tattered sacking when the guard suddenly appeared.^{xvii} Only the quiet voice of the producer: "I think the emphasis should be on this line, would you mind taking that scene again, please? A longer pause before you come down stage." By the end of the week *Outward Bound* was taking shape. Each rehearsal became more enjoyable and I understood why people like Charles Faulder^{xviii} let Britt have his temperamental head. He really knew his stuff.³⁸

Rumors about Leo Britt the perfectionist director and his rehearsals became the stuff of camp legend. "Like so many great producers he took charge of everything and everyone," wrote John Durnford. "Rehearsals, I was told, contained every detail of an authentic production, including scenes of temperament, tears and outbursts that would have done credit to the legitimate stage."³⁹

Shooting Stars: A Case Study

When John Coast first became Leo Britt's ASM in Chungkai, Britt had to explain to the theatre novice what the duties of this important position entailed: "What was the A.S.M.? The Assistant Stage Manager, of course, and he had to hold the book, attend all rehearsals, arrange the calls, work between the Producer and the Theatre Staff, *and* prompt—would I be prepared to take it over? Yes, right—I'd try. We

^{xvii} Normal procedures by other producers and casts during a rehearsal.

^{xviii} Medical Officer Charles Faulder was one of the regulars in Britt's acting company.

started in straight away.”⁴⁰

Coast’s initiation as ASM on the production of *Shooting Stars* provides the most detailed record of Britt’s rehearsals practices. His observations reveal the professional standards Britt constantly worked to instill in his actors and staff.

Most rehearsals are about the same, so we’ll just look in at one in the “Bamboo Theatre” called for 10 o’clock one morning. Seated on a stool marked “Leo Britt” is the great producer, wearing a pair of clompers, sun-glasses, a pink “Jap-Happy,” and a knitted dark blue skullcap. Seated at his side, on a smaller and anonymous stool, is the A.S.M. Hung up on a bamboo thorn is the Call Board, showing all the “Calls” the various actors are due to make that and the following day. This rehearsal is for 10 o’clock, followed by two others. At five minutes to ten, Leo starts fidgeting, and walking up and down, saying nothing for a few minutes, and then suddenly he calls me over. “John,” he says, “do go and see if you can find Bobby, will you? And then there’s Bill [Pycok] and René [Den Daas] not here, either; we can never start until the whole cast is here—will you look in the cookhouse and see if you can drag them out?” “O.K., Leo!” The first week I walked many miles “calling” people who were so sorry they hadn’t seen the Call Board, but in the end we made it their responsibility to go and look at the board daily.⁴¹

Given these rehearsal calls, Britt must have had some agreement with the I. J. A. through POW camp headquarters that when *his* actors were called for a rehearsal during the day, they could be temporarily excused from their light duties.

When all the cast are present who look like turning up that day, we start, and begin with the opening scene—a queue of theatre-goers in London being entertained by buskers while it waits for the “stars” at the stage door, hoping to collect autographs; when these long-awaited people at last appear, they are kidnapped, complete with the band, in a stolen bus and taken on board a gangster’s yacht. Leo has to be very patient, and lines and actions are repeated over and over again, the producer demonstrating what he wants, and trying to interpret for those who are reading their lines un-understandingly, what the words are meant to mean.^{xix} After about an hour everyone has had enough; the A.S.M. has followed the script all the while, and noted down various instructions—for it seems the A.S.M. holds the baby as well as the book!^{xx}

For three weeks we have anything up to four rehearsals a day, and

^{xix} With paper hard to come by, each actor had, perhaps, only been given his “side”—those pages on which his character’s dialogue appears. In an extreme situation when the paper for “sides” was not available, the lines would be read by the ASM and repeated by the actor until he memorized them.

^{xx} The ASM is the only one present with the full text from which to prompt the actors and is responsible for noting down all the “blocking” (movement) determined by the director and keeping notes regarding any additional sets, props, costumes, or lighting concerns that need to be communicated to the designers and technical staff. The ASM does, indeed, hold the baby!

everyone is driven hard by the quality producer, and it's obvious that if the show is a success it's purely due to Leo's terrific personal efforts.⁴²

Hugh de Wardener remembered that Britt's "rallying cry at rehearsals was 'GIVE, GIVE.' And 'give' we did."⁴³

Three weeks with four rehearsals a day would have been as intense as that for a professional production back in England. From Tom Boardman's perspective, Britt "really thought he was producing 'West End' shows."⁴⁴

During the fourth week, rehearsals moved to the theatre so the actors could adjust to the actual space and the director could gain perspective on his show by watching it from a distance in the auditorium. The fifth and final week of rehearsals involved technical and dress rehearsals on stage.

Eventually, there was the flurry and excitement of opening night:

Then comes the first night. "The Curtain goes up at 8:30—call the cast for seven p.m., please, Mr. A.S.M." At seven p.m., more or less punctually, the cast begins to assemble back stage. I have malaria again, with a high temperature, but the heat should sweat the fever out as we go along. Leo is a little anxious about me—I fear only because no-one else is quite sure how to set the different scenes and distribute the hand-props. The actors are first of all made up by the ex-Hollywood make-up man,^{xxi} and they then cross over to the Wardrobe for their clothes.

Bobby, the leading lady, has a wardrobe of his own, including scanties which he has made himself. You see him now made-up and patting his hair, walking up and down in a pair of light blue silk panties, looking at himself in the mirror.^{xxii} In another corner the Camps R.S.M., Sandy Munnoch, with a very beery complexion, is striving to get into a commissioner's uniform—a converted Dutch tunic!^{xxiii45}

^{xxi} The head barber, who had been a makeup artist for Max Factor in Hollywood.

^{xxii} Bobby Spong carried such ladies undergarments with him to Thailand from Singapore.

^{xxiii} This section has been re-paragraphed from the original for better readability.



FIGURE 13.12. ACTORS BACKSTAGE AT TAMARKAN. FLIP RELF.
COURTESY OF RHYLL RIVETT.

Flip Relf's sketch of actors getting ready backstage for a show at Tamarkan is remarkably similar to the scene Coast described.

At eight o'clock Leo sings out, "Call the Half, Mr. A.S.M." I consult the pundits, and then bellow, "Half an hour to go, please gentlemen!" "No, no! It's not necessary to say 'please gentlemen'; in theatre etiquette you merely say 'Half an Hour!'" "O.K., Half an Hour!" Then there's the Quarter, the Beginners, Please! And the orchestra of about 20 instruments, led by the vast Norman Smith, its conductor, goes down to the orchestra-pit.^{xxiv}

Although Alec Knight is called Stage Manager, he is, in effect, the Theatre General Manger^{xxv}—Leo referred to him as the "chief carpenter"—and the S.M.'s job of setting the stage is done solely by me, and from the moment the curtain went up, theoretically I was in charge. So now, the stage is set. Leo inspects it and touches it up, passes it, and the overture starts.⁴⁶

Coast later confessed, "To this day, Leo doesn't know that in the Board of Directors scene, where they are meeting to consider the ransom note, I had left two life-belts from the previous yacht scene still

^{xxiv} In his text, Coast uses the pseudonym Norman "Broad" for "Smith." Smith was a large ("vast") man.
^{xxv} A very important clarification. Perhaps a better term these days would be Production Manager.

hung up on the walls.”⁴⁷

Leo Britt’s demand for professional standards from his actors and production staff spilled over to his expectations of the audience as well. Theatregoers attending *Shooting Stars* were greeted with the following sign:

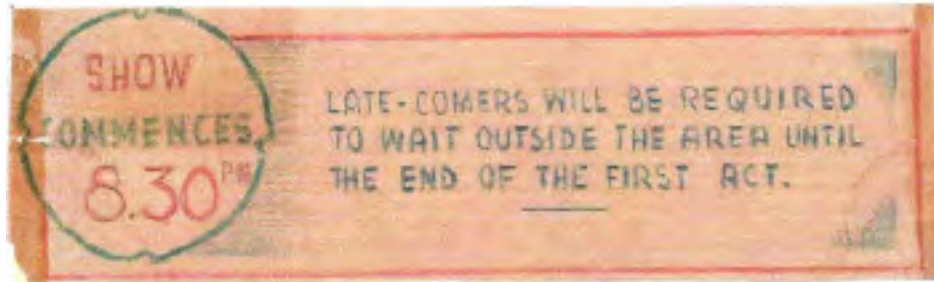


FIGURE 13.13. AUDIENCE ANNOUNCEMENT. IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

Though Britt’s productions, audiences learned to demand the best from their entertainers. Their responses to his productions are detailed in Chapter 6: “Chungkai Showcase.”

The Chungkai Repertory Company

Following his success with the mystery-thriller *Night Must Fall* in June 1944 and *The Amazing Dr. Clitterhouse* in September, Britt embarked on a new and ambitious venture. He would gather together a select group of actors and train them in the techniques of acting and stagecraft to form his “Chungkai Repertory Company.” The productions by this group would be Britt’s supreme achievement as a producer-director on the Thailand-Burma railway.

Custance Baker, who played female roles in this group, kept a diary in which he kept extensive notes on the company’s formation, training, and repertoire, allowing us an “insiders’ view on their activities.

The autumn and winter of 1944 was the period of Leo Britt’s main activity^{xxvi} and this troupe considered themselves as the Chungkai Repertory Company. We often had two or three shows in preparation at once. Word rehearsals in the morning, stage in the afternoon and show in the evening.

The parts of the plays were either copied out from books, which we happened to have in the camp, or more often written down by someone who knew the play well from having acted in it or produced it before the war.⁴⁸

One of these people was Leofric Thorpe, who took over as ASM after Britt’s breakup with Coast in October 1944.^{xxvii}

^{xxvi} Not exactly accurate, but Baker had been ill with malaria through much of the earlier part of the year.

^{xxvii} Coast had outwitted Britt in obtaining costume, set, and lighting materials for his own show, *On Your Toes*: see the details of this dustup in Chapter 6: “Chungkai Showcase,” Part Two

“Tricks of the Trade”

As part of the training regimen, Britt introduced his actors to traditional stagecraft techniques.^{xxviii} Custance Baker elaborated:

Leo taught us odds bits of stagecraft. You must always take hold of a doorknob with the hand on the hinge side so that you can open the door, walk through and close it in one movement. If you seize the knob with the other hand you have to change hands halfway through your entrance or exit.

The prompter, or “Man on the book,” always sits just behind the curtain on the front corner of the stage on the left side, actors left. This is the prompt side; the other side is the O.P. [Opposite Prompt]. When you feel anxious about forgetting your lines, you work your way towards the prompt corner so that he can whisper the words to you before you actually dry. In a small friendly Company like ours other actors can often foresee trouble coming and feed you the lines before you dry.

(This is exactly what happened to Baker in *Hay Fever*. “On the second night I almost dried but one of the cast fed me my words so that I did not have to take a prompt.”⁴⁹)

Stages, Chungkai included, are built on a slight slope so that the audience in the pit or the stalls can see the whole of the stage surface. The back is “up stage” and the front by the foot lights is “down stage.” If two actors are having a dialogue they should stand level with one another so that each can show a three quarters face to the audience and yet still appear to be speaking to one another. The attention of the audience is thus drawn equally to both of them. If one of them works his way up stage he then faces the audience and gains their full attention whereas the other actor is obliged to turn his back on the audience if the dialogue is to continue, and thus loses their full attention. Hence the common phrase “To upstage someone.” A naughty trick, but practiced sometimes by even the nicest people.⁵⁰

Hugh de Wardener was able to supply one more example of Leo’s “theatrical tricks of the trade. I remember one to underline indecision. He suggested that you look down and move the toe of one foot [back and forth] across the floor slowly.”⁵¹

^{xxviii} Lessons in stagecraft that used to be taught to beginning actors in professional schools.

The Repertoire

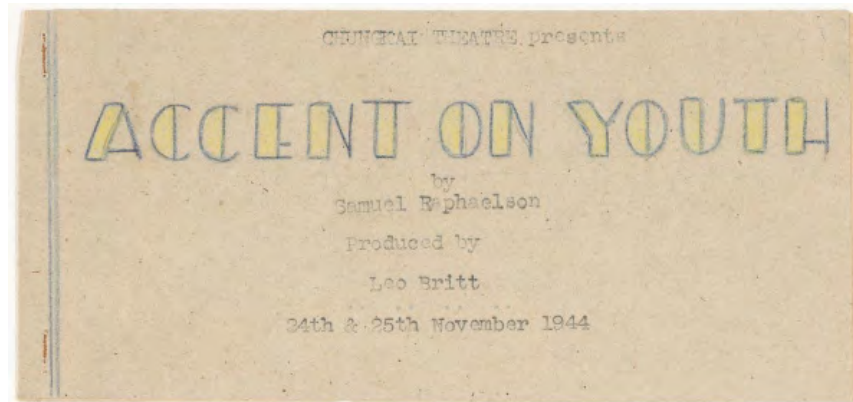


FIGURE 13.14. SMALL POSTER FOR *ACCENT ON YOUTH*. GEOFFREY GEE. IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

The Chungkai Repertory Company's first show was *Youth at the Helm* in mid-November, followed two weeks later by *Accent on Youth*. Even Coast had to acknowledge Britt's brilliant accomplishments not only with the level of the acting achieved but with the way Britt pushed his designers and technicians to greater heights.⁵²

Baker's reminiscences about the Chungkai Rep continue:

Towards the end of 1944 Leo did nearly all the shows^{xxix} and we, his troupe, were kept busy indeed. He did share out the casting so that no one had two long parts going on at once. He always had a wide choice of hopeful actors who wanted to get into the Company, as we were never detailed for upriver maintenance parties.^{xxx53}

^{xxix} Baker's memories are not always accurate, and the order of the shows mentioned is associative and not chronological.
^{xxx} The railway maintenance parties were almost seen as a death sentence. Staying off the drafts for these parties was essential.



FIGURE 13.15. POSTER FOR *CINDERELLA*. GEOFFREY GEE. IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

After a production of Noel Coward's *Hay Fever* in mid-December, the repertory company presented the pantomime *Cinderella* (in which Baker played the Fairy Godmother) for Christmas 1944. Britt believed the story would now hold special significance for the POWs.

Even in 1942 we had maintained the belief that we would eventually win, but it was rather a loyal duty to believe that, but now all the indications were in our favour and this news raised the spirits of all the POWs even the thousand or more in the Sick Huts. So our next performance, *Cinderella*, was presented in an atmosphere of hope and confidence, and it was in fact the happiest show that Britt put on. . . . I believe we ran for six nights, so that everyone could see it and it was very well received.⁵⁴

For January, the rep's show was George Bernard Shaw's *Major Barbara*. Britt must have been very proud to know he had trained his company to the point where they could present this difficult comedy of ideas.⁵⁵ In the audience for one of the performances was Captain C. D. L. Aylwin, who wrote of the production, "It was well up to standard and enthralled me."⁵⁶

The company was in rehearsal with Sutton Vane's fantasy, *Outward Bound*—the play scheduled for February—when an emergency arose and Britt stepped in to save the day:

I remember one of Britt's quite spectacular triumphs. A stage play in rehearsal by another company was due to start on the next Monday, but on the previous Thursday or Friday the male lead went sick with no understudy so the show was cancelled leaving the prospect of a dark stage for a week.



FIGURE 13.16. POSTER FOR *THE RHYTHM CLUB*. GEOFFREY GEE. IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

So the POWs would not be disappointed,

Leo put together a musical show made up of bits from *Merry Widow*, *Poet and Peasant*, *Bittersweet* (in which I play one of the tarts in the café scene who sings the song Ladies of the Town) and other operettas, and an almost non-existent story of boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy finds girl. The words for the song were written in large letters on the back of the fly borders or on the edges of the wings. The speaking parts were held by the actors in their hats or on the back of fans for the ladies. Leo made up the dances as he went along, much helped by Nellie Wallace, who had probably been a chorus boy in peacetime.... We rehearsed all day over the weekend while stage hands painted scenery and put the words up on the borders so that a show did go on as promised and there was no dark stage.⁵⁷

Britt's production of *Outward Bound* was aborted when all theater operations were suddenly closed down and the officers sent to Kanburi Officers' Camp. Baker was just as glad. He found the script of *Outward Bound*, with its cast of recently deceased characters sailing to an unknown fate, very disturbing: "I don't think the audience would have liked it so perhaps it was just as well it was never put on."⁵⁸

"The Outstanding Driving Force"

With his brilliant theatrical productions, Leo Britt became the most celebrated producer on the Thailand-Burma railway. Four former POWs, three of whom worked closely with him, summed up what they thought Leo Britt and his shows had accomplished at Chungkai.

Terry Morris praised Britt as a "man with quite extraordinary talent."⁵⁹ He went on to write, "In

my general assessment Leo Britt was the outstanding driving force behind the whole [POW entertainment] exercise. . . . Certainly his powers of direction & production single him out.⁶⁰

Captain Aylwin had to agree:

An extraordinary high standard of acting and production had been obtained. Such ambitious plays as “The Amazing Dr. Clitherhouse” [sic], “Youth at the Helm” and many another London show had been put on while I had been up country at Kinsayook [sic]. Most of them written from memory. The improvisation of décor and dresses had to be seen to be believed. With only coconut oil lamps, lighting effects were produced to rival any provincial and perhaps even London theatre and the coloured dresses made from mosquito nets and rice sacks were amazing. The leading light behind all this was Leo Britt a L/G1. in the R.A.S.C. . . . He certainly produced the goods and gave us many an hour of fine entertainment.⁶¹

John Coast, who had a complex and sometimes stormy relationship with Britt, still granted Britt and his work the highest accolades: “But in spite of any personal likes or dislikes, everybody had to hand it to Leo because he put on the highest standard of steady entertainment seen in any camp in Thailand . . . and he worked himself untiringly and unceasingly, expecting everyone else to do the same.”⁶² Britt’s demands for professional standards onstage and off transformed the theatre at Chungkai into the most polished and professional performance venue on the railway.

Hugh de Wardener concluded: “Without Leo Britt, things [life as a POW] would not have been as good as they were; there’s no question about it. He should have had a medal for that.”^{xxx163} But no official recognition was ever granted him.

Endnotes

- 1 Cosford, 110.
- 2 Peacock, 224.
- 3 Peacock, 224.
- 4 Richard Sharp, 50.
- 5 Pritchard, “the undefeated,” 3.
- 6 Anckorn, Interview, 46-48.
- 7 Anckorn, Interview, 46-48.
- 8 Weller, Letter, 19 April 2002.
- 9 Albert Coates, “Foreword,” *G-String Jesters*, viii.
- 10 Aylwin, 3.
- 11 Terry Morris, Letter, 11 October 2000.
- 12 Thorpe, Letter, 11 September 2002.
- 13 Information taken from poster, D. W. Jenkins Papers, IWM 65/144/1.

^{xxx1} De Wardener himself was awarded an MBE (Member of the Order of the British Empire) for his unselfish work with cholera patients at Tamarikan.

- 14 Thorpe, Letter, 11 September 2002.
- 15 Thorpe, Letter, 25 May 2000.
- 16 John Sharp, Diary, 12 December 1942.
- 17 Mackintosh, Diary, 23 May 1944.
- 18 Owtram, 104.
- 19 Allison, *Begone Dull Care*, 96–97.
- 20 John Sharp, Diary, 19 February 1944.
- 21 Richard Sharp, Unpublished memoir, 50.
- 22 De Wardener, Interview, 23.
- 23 De Wardener, E-mail, 2 March 2011.
- 24 Carter, 179–180.
- 25 Gee, Diary.
- 26 Coast, 175.
- 27 Coast, 179–180.
- 28 Tom Boardman, “Questionnaire,” 1–2.
- 29 Tom Boardman, Interview, 60.
- 30 Coast, 175.
- 31 Thorpe, Interview, 27.
- 32 Anckorn, Interview, 29.
- 33 Tom Boardman, Interview, 60.
- 34 Tom Boardman, Interview, 59.
- 35 Tom Boardman, “Questionnaire,” 1–2.
- 36 Milner, Diary, 21 May 1944.
- 37 De Wardener, Interview, 24–25.
- 38 Carter, 182.
- 39 Durnford, 147.
- 40 Coast, 174.
- 41 Coast, 176.
- 42 Coast, 176–177.
- 43 De Wardener, E-mail, 2 March 2011.
- 44 Tom Boardman, “Questionnaire,” 1–2.
- 45 Coast, 177–178.
- 46 Coast, 178.
- 47 Coast, 178.
- 48 Baker, “Extracts from ‘A Memoir,’” 12–13.
- 49 Baker, “Extracts from ‘A Memoir,’” 14.
- 50 Baker, “Extracts from ‘A Memoir,’” 15–16.
- 51 De Wardener, E-mail, 2 March 2011.
- 52 Coast, 184–185.
- 53 Baker, “Extracts from ‘A Memoir,’” 13.
- 54 Baker, “Extracts from ‘A Memoir,’” 15.
- 55 Baker, “Extracts from ‘A Memoir,’” 13.
- 56 Aylwin, 1945 Folder, 3.
- 57 Baker, “Extracts from ‘A Memoir,’” 12–13.
- 58 Baker, “Extracts from ‘A Memoir,’” 17.
- 59 Terry Morris, Self-Interview #1, 4.
- 60 Terry Morris, Letter, 11 October 2000.
- 61 Aylwin, 1945 Folder, 3.
- 62 Coast, 175.
- 63 De Wardener, Interview, 31–32.

Chapter 14: “Somebody Had to Put a Skirt On”

Female Impersonators

Though all the musical and theatrical producers and performers gained special recognition and status as “precious personalities”¹ in the hospital and relocation camps in Thailand, none were more precious to the POWs than the female impersonators.

In Tamarkan, there was Ted Weller, Jack Farmer, “Poodles” Norley, Sid “Happy” Marshall, Jack Turner, Vilhelm Vanderdecken, and “Sambal Sue”; in Nong Pladuk, Basil Ferron, Ronnie Parr, Michael Curtis, and “Skipsey.” Chungkai had Douglas Morris, John “Nellie” Wallace, “Jackie” Steenhuizen, Puck Jonkmans, Dick Lucas, Custance Baker, Pat Donovan, Freddie Thompson, and Bobby Spong; Nakhon Pathom claimed Ken Adams, Jack Chalker, Ken Cornish, and, later, Vilhelm Vanderdecken. In Kanburi, “Popsey” Saunders, “Blondie” Weightman, Syd “Sylvia” Ray, Len Cheetham and “Pamela” Webber graced the stage. Following the changeover to the officers’ camp in 1945, John Durnford and Freddie Thompson joined their ranks. These officers and other ranks were the major Australian, British, and Dutch/Indonesian female impersonators in Thailand during 1944–45. Others played this role occasionally, but these men were the “stars.”

Military concert parties “for the troops by the troops” featuring female impersonators was a British military tradition that went as far back as the eighteenth century, if not earlier.ⁱ Having females represented in concert parties ensured a range of content not feasible without them. They had been a huge success in shows behind the lines during the First World War, which J. G. Fuller in his study of troop morale attributed to the belief that “their trappings of elegance and luxury were the negation of war and squalor and, as such, a potent fetish of peace.”²

This tradition continued into the Second World War and thus into the POW camps in Southeast Asia. When Jimmy Walker organized “The Harbour Lights” concert party in his work camp in Keppel Harbour, Singapore, in 1942, he insisted that “somebody had to put a skirt on.”³ Although Walker may have met some resistance, he did not lack for a volunteer; nor did the concert parties in the main camp at Changi.

Their value to the morale of the POWs was inestimable. Laurie Allison believed the impersonators “were a tonic to all” and noted that they “received loud applause even before they commenced their act.”⁴ Writing about the female impersonators in Changi POW Camp, Singapore, Tom Wade explained why this was so: “In POW Camp we had no heroes: no war heroes, political heroes, sport heroes. The only people about whom there was any glamour were the actors and most idolized of these were the female impersonators.”⁵

Traditional Categories

Of the three traditional categories for female impersonators in military entertainment units—comic drag acts and chorus lines, skilled dancers or singers, or glamorous “illusionists”—it was the first of these that quickly disappeared from the entertainment produced in the camps in Thailand. The only occurrence of a farcical “Beauty Ballet” was in the Wampo Concert Party during the railway construction—and that quickly developed into a chorus line of “serious” dancers. In the hospital and relocation camps,

ⁱ See Frey, Sylvia R. *The British Soldier in America: A Social History of Military Life in the Revolutionary Period*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981; and Leslie O’Dell, “Amateurs of the Regiment, 1815–1870” in *Early Stages: Theatre in Ontario 1800–1914*. Ed. Ann Saddlemeier. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986, 52–89.

with their innumerable variety shows, revues, musical comedies, and plays, the POWs needed female impersonators to appear as “real women,” playing their roles “straight,” not “for laughs.”

For these types of shows, the impersonators’ dancing, singing, and acting abilities took precedence, and those with the most versatility became highly prized. For the revues, musical comedies, and plays, the female impersonators were further typecast into four sub-categories: the “glamorous woman,” who could enchant men with her sexual allure; “the young woman” (wife, sweetheart, or prostitute); “the *ingénue*” (an innocent and pert young girl or a sassy soubrette); or the “older woman” (mothers, aunts, grandmothers), usually played by other POWs brought in for a one-off performance, although Freddie Thompson specialized in these roles.

The images of women the POWs saw represented on stage are difficult to gauge because of the paucity of information about the shows’ content, but it appears that the variety shows featured imitations of popular film, radio, or stage celebrities, while the revues, musicals, and plays displayed middle- and upper-class women of the 1920s and 1930s—and sometimes, “ladies of the night.” These women, in the main, confirmed the POWs’ cultural stereotypes.

The official view propagated by the POW camp administrators was that the women back home were dear mothers and faithful, loving wives and sweethearts waiting patiently, like Penelope, for their loved one’s return. These myths were perpetuated in order to reduce the troops’ anxiety and to keep morale high, even though everyone secretly feared the situation on the home front might be otherwise. And heaven help the theatre producer who suggested it might be otherwise. When Dudley Gotla’s *Thai Diddle Diddle* presented a comic sketch in which a returning POW discovered he had fathered a baby boy *in absentia*, Gotla was reprimanded and sent back up the line on a dreaded maintenance party for punishment (see Chapter 6: “Chungkai Showcase,” Part Two).

Performers’ Bios

Though detailed descriptions of the female impersonators and their performances are limited in the POW literature, by combining what is found there with information gleaned from interviews and correspondence, enough has been gathered on several of the most important officer and other ranks impersonators to tell us something about them as personalities, what their performances were like, and how audiences responded to them. One general comment about the impersonators’ physical attributes was made by Charles Fisher: “It was astonishing to see how so many of the least impressive-looking prisoners managed to transform themselves into remarkably glamorous creatures with the aid of locally improvised theatrical make-up and elegant dresses.”⁶

Ted Weller. The Australian Ted Weller had been a singer in the variety shows in Aungmya, Burma, but not as a female impersonator. Because he was a “silver tenor with a strong falsetto range,” Norman Carter cast him as the “leading lady” in a series of musical comedies and revues at Tamarkan: “Dorothy” in *The Wizard of Oz*, “Lily Langtry” in *Memories of the Gay 90s*, and “Lady Rowena” in *When Knights Were Bold*.⁷ From these roles, it is evident that Weller played the *ingénue* and young women types.



FIGURE 14.1. PHOTOGRAPH OF LIEUTENANT TED WELLER.
COURTESY OF TED AND BET WELLER.

A photographic portrait of Ted Weller taken in 1939, when he received his commission as a second lieutenant, shows a handsome, fresh-faced young officer with gentle features who, with a wig and some makeup, could easily be transformed into a beautiful young woman.

Weller underestimated his abilities as a female impersonator: “I don’t believe I created the female roles I played but went along with the script and music to the best interpretation I could to enhance the presentation of the play. Most of it was laid out in the script.”⁸ He was obviously quite skilled: on two separate occasions, seasoned A.I.F. concert party producer Major Jim Jacobs called Weller, “a fair dinkumⁱⁱ Aussie impersonator” and “a female impersonator second to none.”⁹

ⁱⁱ Australian slang for “the genuine article.”



FIGURE 14.2. “TED WELLER GOES EDWARDIAN AS BAND VOCALIST” RAE NIXON’S SKETCHBOOK. COURTESY OF MRS. RAE NIXON.

Weller also performed as a female vocalist in Tony Gerrish’s dance band shows. Tom Morris remembered Weller as “a slim, slight-built, little fellow [who] had a boyish voice at his command . . . a most glorious boy soprano voice.”¹⁰

“**Sambal Sue.**” Also in Tamarkan convalescent camp was the Dutch/Indonesian performer known as “Sambal Sue.” American POW Kyle Thompson, a stagehand in the Tamarkan theatre, included a lengthy description of “her” in his memoir:

a Dutch army Eurasian, who had delicate features and developed into a sensational female impersonator. This fellow had dark brown eyes with long, curling eyelashes, and a smooth olive complexion. He was five feet, five inches tall and weighed about 150 pounds—the perfect size for a female impersonator—and when he was made up with a wig and what served as cosmetics, he was a dead ringer for the real thing.¹¹

His specialty was the Hawaiian hula. And it was his sensational performance of this dance on the stage at Tamarkan that earned him the nickname “Sambal Sue” after the spicy Indonesian finger food made by POWs in the Netherlands East Indies Army and available in the canteen.



FIGURE 14.3. "TED WELLER GOES EDWARDIAN AS BAND VOCALIST." SKETCHBOOK DETAIL, RAE NIXON. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL. COURTESY OF MRS. RAE NIXON.

On his thumbnail sketch of "Sambal Sue," Rae Nixon appended the note, "Dutchman knocks audience for loop with Hawaiian Dance. (Looked like the real thing.)."¹²

"Skippy." In Nong Pladuk relocation camp was another Dutch female impersonator—also a dancer—known as "Skippy," who Fergus Anckorn claimed looked "EXACTLY like Marlene Dietrich!—and dare I say it—to us at the time, she looked gorgeous. She (he) had the most wonderful gowns,—God know where the material came from. We scarcely had material enough for a handkerchief."¹³ "Skippy's" dance partner, Frans, Anckorn recalled, was "a black, Javanese fellow. And they used to dance ravishing tangos and dances. I mean, you'd swear he was a girl. And people would cheer like mad when she came on. I say 'she' because that's all you could think of: blond hair, blue-eyed, and with a face like a doll."ⁱⁱⁱ⁴

Basil Ferron. The main British female impersonator in Nong Pladuk was Basil Ferron, whom Norman Pritchard described as an "Anglo-Indian . . . and very small chap . . . slight . . . and could pass for a girl easily."¹⁵ In Anckorn's view, Ferron was "a gorgeous-looking Indian girl, flashing eyes and all the rest of it."¹⁶

Ken Adams and Jack Chalker. In the British variety shows and plays at Nakhon Pathom hospital camp, Ken Adams was cast in the glamour roles and Jack Chalker played the ingénue/soubrette roles. Like Weller, he also sang as a female vocalist in band shows. Describing Adams, Chalker wrote, "In looks he was taller and more heavily built than Bobby Spong and with less immediate female face, but made up well and assumed female movement and voice pitch well."¹⁷ When Adams appeared onstage in P. G. Wodehouse's comedy *Good Morning Bill* dressed in the silk cami-knickers that had been donated for the show from an anonymous source, he received what Chalker termed, "a stunning reception from the audience."^{iv18}

iii In describing the most effective impersonators, pronoun confusion and quotation mark usage is common [Rachamimov, "Comforts," 379].
iv To elicit this response, somebody in the company must have know about the practice of "tucking" done by professional female impersonators to hide the male genitals.



FIGURE 14.4. JACK CHALKER IN BANGKOK FOLLOWING LIBERATION.
PHOTOGRAPH. COURTESY OF JACK CHALKER.

In contrast, Chalker was of medium height and had a slight build—ideal for the young female roles he played. Fred Ransome Smith remembered Chalker as “a handsome chap with an aquiline nose & slim with quite a head of hair!” Trying to recall Chalker’s appearance on stage, he wrote, “I can only say the audiences responded rapturously.”¹⁹

The POW producer/performer Captain “Fizzer” Pearson first spotted Chalker as a possible female impersonator back in Chungkai in December 1943:

My first “female” role as a dim witted vicar’s daughter occurred up country at Christmas in a very short comic stint with Fizzer. There was no one else available at the time who had taken part in performance—such as I had had at school. (But all male parts.) I did it for a lark and off the cuff, and I think this must have set the scene for later roles—which was far from intentional. There was no coercion to do this—only the fun of being a member of the team, and when there was no one else to take the part. All rather by accident.²⁰

Bobby Spong, Douglas Morris, and John “Nellie” Wallace. Of the three major British female impersonators at Chungkai, only Spong—arguably the most famous POW female impersonator in Thailand—was written about extensively in the POW literature. He will become the focus of an in-depth inquiry later in this chapter.

Douglas Morris was one of Chungkai’s best impersonators—and, perhaps, its finest “actress.” His performance in the title role in Leo Britt’s production of G. B. Shaw’s *Major Barbara* was widely praised. His attractiveness as a female impersonator is readily apparent from the *Wonder Bar* photographs.



FIGURE 14.5. DOUGLAS MORRIS, DETAIL FROM *WONDER BAR* PHOTOGRAPHS. COURTESY OF MARTIN PERCIVAL.



FIGURE 14.6. JOHN "NELLIE" WALLACE. DETAILS FROM *WONDER BAR* PHOTOGRAPHS. COURTESY OF MARTIN PERCIVAL.

Custance Baker described John "Nellie" Wallace as "long, thin and extraordinarily supple [who] could turn out some sort of a dance at a moment's notice."²¹ Trained as a ballet dancer before enlisting in the army, Wallace was invaluable as a dancer and choreographer. Unlike Bobby Spong, whose acting style was considered "natural," Wallace's was "camp."

Besides these three, there were several other important "female" stars in the Chungkai theatre:

Dick Lucas and Custance Baker. Patrick Stephenson these two were the "prettiest girls" in the Chungkai shows.²²



FIGURE 14.7. BARRY CUSTANCE BAKER. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF HILARY CUSTANCE GREEN.

Baker described himself as "a small slim handsome young man and a good dancer."²³ He first got involved with the theatre as a "stage carpenter and odd job man" gaining the "proud nickname of

'Makeshift,' 'Custance Makeshift Baker.'²⁴ "My true potential as a chorus girl and romantic actress," he wrote, tongue in cheek, "was not recognized until later."²⁵

Baker claimed that Dick Lucas "took over as leading lady [in the Chungkai shows] in late 1944."²⁶ Of his appearance as Cinders in the panto, *Cinderella*, Basil Peacock wrote, "I shall never forget the sight of Cinderella (one of our younger and prettier subalterns) going to the ball in a golden coach and waving to us like royalty."²⁷

Freddie Thompson. As he was older and had been wounded in the battle for Singapore, Freddie Thompson specialized in playing the "older woman" types, such as Mrs. Bramston in the mystery-thriller *Night Must Fall*. G. E. Chippington, one of his fans, included a brief bio in his entry on Thompson's appearance as the Fairy Queen in the pantomime *Babes in Thailand* at Takanun in late 1943:

Freddie, who back in Changi, half his jaw removed by a mortar bomb, had shuffled like a little old man, bent and emaciated towards me, his hand outstretched in greeting. I recalled his long nights when he rested his torn face on a hot brick to try and ease the pain or walked up and down outside his hut in the darkness and waited for the dawn.

. . . here he was, up here on the railway in the heart of the jungle tripping the light fantastic, hopping about the stage in a highly credible imitation of a Fairy Queen . . . as though that mortar bomb had never happened. His determination and will power have won him the victory. . . . His wounds may have radically altered and twisted the shape and outline of his face but they cannot stop the old spirit shining through.²⁸

Hugh "Ginger" de Wardener. Hugh "Ginger" de Wardener was an anomaly. Except for his one-off stint as the Fairy Queen in *Babes in Thailand* at Takanun,^v he did not play female roles. Hut-mate Captain Patrick McArthur wrote, "Ginger is a splendid pale golden haired Adonis with a delightfully free and easy unaffected manner and plenty of fun and good humour, born in Paris in the last war and parents (mother at least) American."²⁹ But when the producer Leo Britt convinced the handsome young medical officer that no one else could play the important ingénue role of Olivia Grayne in *Night Must Fall* as well as he could, de Wardener instantly became one of the camp's most versatile and highly prized actors.

Under Britt's careful guidance, the men playing female roles in his productions learned how to transform into "women." "He was strict with us girls," Custance Baker wrote. "Report to the theatre after first rice^{vi} and from then on wear skirts and high heels to become used to moving like a woman."^{vii30} By surrendering himself totally to the character's physical movements and gestures as well as to the possibilities of his costumes, de Wardener learned how to create the young woman called for in the text.

It was a difficult thing for me to do, because I had to learn all these feminine

^v De Wardener appeared as the Fairy Godmother on opening night; Freddie Thompson for the second performance.

^{vi} "After first rice" was the after the first serving of food. If there was any food left over after all men were served, the POWs could get back in line for "second rice."

^{vii} "Some of us became anxious that we might possibly be becoming too too girlish, and to prevent this we kept a stock of barbells and weight bar (bamboo and logs) behind the stage, which we could lift from time to time as an assurance that our manly muscles were still all there." [Baker, "Extracts from A Memoir, 13]

movements. For instance, it wasn't until the dress rehearsal that I realized that the skirt made a difference of how you moved. . . . And I remember as I went around the table, the skirt went upwards. I went, "Ah, that's useful Yes, that makes the movement more natural." So I then did it with my hips.

The main thing was where to put your hands. This was a hysterical girl. And I had to know exactly where my hands were—both of them—throughout the whole play. I must never have a moment where I didn't know where my hands were supposed to be.

And I worked it out. There were about eighteen positions, I think. And at any one moment, they were in a particular one of those. So then I felt quite at ease with my hands.³¹

Audio



14.1

Olivia Grayne was the only major female role Hugh de Wardener ever played.

These, then, are the most significant female impersonators mentioned in the POW literature on the Thailand-Burma Railway. In Fergus Anckorn's estimation, "all of the impersonators were brilliant. . . . They were all extremely good and they could carry it off."³²

"First Feeling of Lust for Two Years!"

In their memoirs, the POWs never missed an opportunity to point out that the Japanese and Korean guards appeared to be sexually attracted to the female impersonators. Of "Sambal Sue," Tom Morris said that "all the Japs in the camp had the hots for him [Laughs]."³³ Chalker recalled that in both Chungkai and Nakhon Pathom, "some of the Korean and Jap guards frequently came sniffing round the dressing rooms back-stage where female-cast members were dressing and making-up, and had to be diplomatically steered away."³⁴ But it wasn't only the Japanese who were sexually attracted to the female impersonators. Without any qualifications as to who was doing the desiring, Wilbur Smith claimed, "They were propositioned all the time in the camp."³⁵

By the spring of 1944, with a better diet that included eggs and meat and minimal work requirements, a number of POWs in the hospital and relocation camps experienced sexual urges for the first time since the beginning of their captivity. (They had worried that the starvation diet endured during the railway construction would make them impotent.) And in a world without women, the only focuses for their fantasies were the female impersonators. "Clearly some of our leading ladies seemed to be as intensely sought after by their respective fans as were the real-life counterparts in London's theatre-land," Charles Fisher observed, "and more than a few wells of loneliness apparently changed overnight into fountains of desire."³⁶

Examples of this type of projection are found in James Richardson's report of a fellow POW's remark on seeing the Dutch/Indonesian female impersonators in one of Joop Postma's early cabarets at Chungkai: "First feeling of lust for two years!"³⁷ (In the annotated version of his diary, Richardson elaborated on this statement: "So considering the debilitating [*sic*] and virtually desexing effects of a prolonged rice diet, this was an eloquent acknowledgement of excellence of the 'girls' performance."³⁸) Geoffrey Gee had

a similar response to one of those same impersonators: “gorgeous Jackie Stoenhosen [Steenhuizen] as Carmen Miranda. Oo, la, la!”³⁹ In another instance, Custance Baker overheard this comment about his and Dick Lucas’ performances as prostitutes in *Café Colette* as he was leaving the theatre: “Those fucking tarts were more like fucking tarts than real fucking tarts.”⁴⁰ Finally, there is Roy Whitecross’s admission that “the sight of the leading ‘ladies’ awoke memories that had better been left asleep.”⁴¹

From his exhaustive research of POW life in the Pacific during World War II, Richard Daws concluded, “In prison camps, to be able to feast the eyes on something that looked like a woman was a powerful thing. And Complicated.”⁴² “Complicated” because in the all-male environment of the POW camps, the “women” the prisoners were responding to were men dressed as women. And the POWs knew that—intellectually. But over and over in their memoirs, interviews, and correspondence, those who worked on the Thailand-Burma Railway insist that the ‘illusionists’—the female impersonators who worked hard to convince their male audiences they were women—were *experienced* as “women,” not as men in drag. As Custance Baker explained, that was their goal:

We girls in Leo [Britt’s] company, maintained the illusion that we were really actresses, not men dressed up. Many female impersonators nowadays tend to end their act by shedding their wigs and bras to gasps of astonishment from the audience. We never did. We were girls right to the final curtain.⁴³

Fergus Anckorn testified to their effectiveness: “And when you saw a play with men and women in it, you would never think for a moment that they were all men. In the beginning there was a lot of whistling and hooting going on . . . [but as time went by it was] accepted completely. But it was appreciated, I know, because these fellows could forget that there were no women anywhere and they really believed what they were seeing, so it must have been very good for morale.”⁴⁴ As a consequence, Daws explained, “there were wistful longings heterosexual, homosexual, or just confused by captivity. Everyone liked looking at the stage ladies.”⁴⁵

This phenomenon was not new: the same thing had happened in response to female impersonators in military concert parties during the First World War. Fuller’s research into the subject led him to the conclusion that the “considerable sexual excitement” generated in the soldiers by the female impersonators “shows the intensity of the desire to believe.” Analyzing that conclusion a bit further, he added, “it seems likely that the appeal of the concert party ‘girls’ owed as much to their emphasis upon glamour as to the sheer fewness of the females.”⁴⁶ Allan Bérubé drew much the same conclusion from his study of female impersonators in American “soldier shows” during the Second World War:

On the surface, men in drag played only with the rigidity of gender roles. Spectators willingly pretended that these soldiers in drag were “women,” laughing at the clowns who made fun of the situation and standing in awe at the magic performed by the illusionists who appeared to be real women. Male reviewers and GIs in the audience comfortably talked about the sex appeal of the beautiful “women” on stage because they also like looking at women in real life.⁴⁷

But as Daws intimates, the spectator's gaze is more complicated than this "safety valve" explanation would have us believe. From his investigation into the phenomenon in First World War military concert parties, David Boxwell drew a more nuanced conclusion:

While the spectacle of a soldier in drag functioned according to the "safety valve" model of cathartic ritual, the form and content of the drag performer's "act," strongly dependent as it was on multiple entendre, close physical contact with other men (both in and out of drag), and the illusion of eroticized, idealized, and objectified femininity, disrupted the boundaries that contained the act as a necessary release in an all-male environment. A spectator's desiring and approving gaze on a soldier in drag was not simply a matter of pleasure in a "surrogate" woman; rather, his gaze was directed at an effeminate-acting man in drag, a fellow soldier in his own military organization.⁴⁸

Custance Baker remembered, it wasn't only in the spectator's gaze where "desiring" occurred. In *Outward Bound*, Leo Britt cast Custance Baker and Dick Lucas as "a young couple very much in love."

They have little part in the play except to sit in corners kissing and embracing and murmuring love to one another: "Darling, sweetheart, I love you so much." After a few dull rehearsals we decided to learn both parts and to play boy and girl on alternating nights . . . After many sessions of kissing and cuddling a pretty young man dressed as a girl, or when I was a girl being treated similarly by this same girl now dressed as a man I began to feel some considerable attachment to Dickie. Nothing physical you understand! Pat Stephenson agreed with me that it was really a lesbian tendency, so perhaps I am really a lesbian after all. My four children and eleven grandchildren seem to make this unlikely.⁴⁹

Joking aside, Baker's emotional attachment might be better described as "de-sexualized homosexuality," a phenomenon discussed by Iris Rachamimov in her investigation into shifting gender boundaries in First World War Internment camps.⁵⁰

Sexual Outlets

If sexual urges were reawakened by female impersonators, what exactly was the nature of those urges and how did the POWs deal with them? Laurie Allison believed that "throughout our incarceration women had taken a holiday and were elevated to being a fondly remembered other world." For him, the POWs' response to the female impersonators was generally benign. "After the show," he wrote, "the men would return to their huts and, lying on the bamboo slats, there, undoubtedly, would be introspective mulling in their minds of what these women impersonators brought back to them."⁵¹

But John Sharp's diary entries regarding the availability of "Dutch 'navy-cake'"^{viii} and medical

^{viii} *Navy-cake* is homosexual code for anal intercourse.

officer “Schoolie” Faulder’s aside that “we have done almost every type of operation except childbirth—and after what is going on in the camp now we’re expecting to do that soon” indicates that some of the men had sought a more active outlet for their sexual fantasies.⁵² Stephen Alexander’s report of a confession by fellow officer Terence Charley offers additional evidence:

Many of us have been regressing to our schooldays ever since we hit the egg belt, and, of course I’ve been at it longer than some of you. The better rations at Chungkai soon had me on the hop, and the stage shows didn’t help my dreams a bit. But the female impersonators among the officers usually had their “protectors,” and when I felt the sparks flying with anyone in the ranks, I had to remember that even if I couldn’t think like a gentlemen, I had to act like an officer.⁵³

Sexual Orientation

The female impersonators’ sexual orientation was always grist for the camp rumor mills. Fergus Anckorn thought that “a lot of them were effeminate. So they could do it [perform as a female impersonator] and they loved it.”⁵⁴ In the first half of the twentieth century, especially in the military, being labeled *effeminate* was equated with being called *queer*. The dancer “Skippy” at Nong Pladuk was, in Anckorn’s eyes, as “queer as a clockwork orange.”⁵⁵ He also suspected that Basil Ferron may have been gay: “it was quite [obvious] that he was queer all right . . . well, I’ll say that he was effeminate, put it that way.”⁵⁶ But Norman Pritchard strongly disagreed with that supposition: “I think Basil was probably just a bit of a showman anyway. And was pleased to be asked to take the spotlight.”⁵⁷

David Wince was convinced that the female impersonators he saw at Chungkai were homosexuals. “As I can remember,” he wrote, “most, or even all of the female impersonators lived together at the end of one of the huts. I can still remember seeing their ‘smalls’^{ix} hanging up to dry after being washed. But I never witnessed any homosexual acts. I can only go by their personal idiosyncrasies, and by the way they spoke and moved. I don’t think I was mistaken!”⁵⁸

Being thought queer by the other troops was one of the fears that men had to deal with when asked to become a female impersonator. When Geoffrey Gee was approached, he hesitated, wondering what the role might do to his status. “In many ways I should enjoy it,” Gee mused, “but feel I haven’t the necessary confidence to carry it off, nor have I the talent such as singing, impersonations, etc. etc. which to me seems so all-essential. The two main things to make me hesitate are 1. Will it bring about my discharge from hospital? Undesirable. And 2. Will it cause my friends etc. to take the piss out of me and thus lose caste?”⁵⁹

Norman Carter encountered similar difficulties finding a POW to play Dorothy for his production of *The Wizard of Oz* in Tamarkan before finally convincing Lieutenant Ted Weller to take the part.

The trouble was finding a leading lady. Nobody was interested. Finally, I asked Arthur Shakes, who suggested having a word with Teddy Weller, a handsome young officer. I approached Teddy and got a firm “No!” What would his mates say? What would his Kumi^x say? If he dressed up like a woman and sang like

^{ix} Panties.

^x Japanese term for his own hut of junior officers.

one, he'd never live it down. Besides he was far too busy with his softball team. It was not until I told him bluntly that if he did not play Judy^{xi} I'd have to cancel the show that he reluctantly consented.⁶⁰

Weller's own memory of how he was convinced to become a female impersonator differs from Carter's: "This caused me some embarrassment and on discussion with my commanding officer regarding losing respect from the men, was told they wouldn't be able to do many of the plays without my voice. It turned out the men gave me more respect than ever."⁶¹

Jack Chalker had also put up some resistance at first: "I took one or two female parts there, just short little ones. I don't why the hell I got into that [Laughs], which, of course, was a laugh, but it was in [Chungkai^{xii}] camp that I first did that. I got ragged like cattle. I said, 'I can't do this.' They said, 'Come on,' you know."⁶² But once he relented, he recalled,

I personally never received any flak after playing female roles, and we all regarded it as a huge joke. . . . The most enjoyable parts for me were in comedy—such as Wodehouse, or in silly short reviews [revues]—and the business of playing a female character, as well as male, was simply great fun and an immense pleasure to be involved in something not only important to our corporate lives but a constructive escape from our own carnage.

Apart from never experiencing "flak" for taking female roles, I had no homosexual advances made to me because of it and such matters never entered my mind.⁶³

Chalker, though, did not play the "glamour" roles, although he did play a sexy gold digger in *Good Morning Bill*. But he had to admit that Ken Andrews, who did, may well have received some undue attention because of his portrayals.⁶⁴

Though many female impersonators, like Weller, tried to minimize speculation about their sexual orientation—"I always changed out of costume immediately [after a show]. There was no doubt I was there as a soldier and a lieutenant"⁶⁵—their efforts did not necessarily prevent those projections from taking place. "Sambal Sue," who gained fame in Tamarkan with his sexy hulas and other performances, discovered he was the recipient of unwanted male fantasies. During an interview, Stan Gailbraith had a sudden, startling recollection of "Sambal Sue," exclaiming, "Lots of girls would be very envious of his legs!"⁶⁶

Kyle Thompson tells what happened when the playful banter about "Sambal Sue's" sexuality—which all the female impersonators faced—turned into innuendo and behavior that became just too obvious to ignore:

[Pat] Fox and ["Sambal Sue"^{xiii}] became good friends and often played

^{xi} Judy Garland played the role of Dorothy in the popular film.

^{xii} Chalker mistakenly writes Kanyu here.

^{xiii} There is a problem for me with Thompson's identification here. From my research I have found no indication that Pat Fox ever played opposite "Sambal Sue." The only way this passage makes sense to me is if the female impersonator really being discussed is Ted Weller.

opposite each other in male-female roles. Inevitably, rumors began circulating that they might be more than just fellow actors. The female impersonator quickly became a celebrity, but not of the sort he sought. Some of the guys around camp began issuing flirtatious whistles and catcalls as he walked about. Shortly, this all became too humiliating and he quit the stage. . . . He told us one night after an unusually good performance that it was his last, as he could not continue being confined in close quarters with thousands of POWs who had not been in the company of actual females for nearly three years.⁶⁷

Thompson himself was convinced that “Sambal Sue” had no “homosexual tendencies” whatsoever.⁶⁸

But “Sambal Sue” wasn’t the only female impersonator in Tamarkan who was the recipient of such innuendo. According to Tom Morris, Ted Weller also became a victim of speculation: “Rohan Rivett made some disparaging remarks about Teddy Weller and his female impersonating, whereupon Teddy thumped him and he [Weller] refused from that day on to participate.”⁶⁹

Even G. E. Chippington, after writing glowingly about Freddie Thompson’s several performances as a female impersonator, felt it necessary to defend him against any reader’s suspicions that he might be a homosexual. “It should not be inferred from Freddie’s playing ‘female’ roles that there is anything ‘odd’ about him,” he insisted. “In fact, I have noticed no such ‘oddness’ at any time here. Should anyone make such a suggestion in Freddie’s hearing I fear he would experience a very ‘masculine’ fist planted firmly on the end of his nose.”⁷⁰

The majority of the female impersonators, it appears, had no other motive than the fulfillment of duty, which was—in this abnormal world become the new normal—to keep up the morale of the troops. Speaking from his own observation, Terry Morris (brother of the popular female impersonator Douglas Morris) reiterated Jimmy Walker’s statement about the necessity of finding men to play the female roles if the concert parties were to develop more substantial entertainment: “Somebody had to wear the skirt’ really . . . sums up the situation.”⁷¹

“Challenging the Heterosexual Norm”

From Custance Baker’s account of his and Dick Lucas’ experience as female impersonators, the “truth” about their representation and its reception appears to be even more “complicated.” According to Terence Charley, the production of plays like *The Circle* always “aroused curiosity as to how they would tackle the love scenes.”

Two males indulging in a passionate embrace in public, even if dramatically desirable is not, among the English at any rate, a thing to be lightly undertaken, even if one of them is masquerading as a woman, indeed that probably makes it much worse. Even if the man is as “queer” as a coot he will often prefer not to have his little bit of fun in public & if he isn’t, well you never know, people may think he is. The rumor, therefore, was sedulously put about that our leading lady, Bobby Spong, suffered from halitosis so that even the chaste embraces that our actors permitted themselves would be generally recognized to be distasteful to them.⁷²

Though actors may have been required by the script to engage in quick kisses (see the stage directions and dialogue for *Good Morning Bill* in Nakhon Pathom) at other times they might have used the old technique of turning their heads upstage as they embraced. Supposedly, the illusion of passionate embraces could only be carried so far before disrupting established heterosexual boundaries. Or so it was thought.

Custance Baker's recall of his "kiss and cuddle" scenes in *Outward Bound* (see above) and *Hay Fever* appear to totally undercut this theory. "In my best [*Hay Fever*] scene twisting around on a very hard bamboo sofa with the host I was often worried that our kisses might cause giggles or rude comment from our brutal and licentious audience, but we got away with it and the host, Leo [Britt] himself, once whispered to me, 'They're taking it OK, do it just once more.' So we did, and the Japs who came every night and sat in the front row just loved it."⁷³ And what about the POWs?

However Baker understood what "illusion" he and his kissing partners were creating, they were certainly "challenging the heterosexual norm." As Alan Bérubé explained in his study of female impersonators in American "soldier shows,"

The most daring and skillful GI drag performers were like magicians. They played tricks with gender, becoming master of the art of illusion with a sense of humor. They created beautiful attractive women out of men, affirming the heterosexuality of their audiences, then played with the implications, covertly challenging the heterosexual norm by becoming men dressed as women hugging, kissing, and singing love songs to other men.⁷⁴

What the evidence suggests is that during the long incarceration of the POW on the Thailand-Burma railway, the boundaries of "the heterosexual norm" became less fixed and more permeable than might be suspected.

The Others

There were others—the transvestites, the cross-dressers—who specialized in the "glamour" roles and liked to wear female attire and didn't mind if their actions provoked sexual innuendo or advances. These were the impersonators who "took their 'art' too seriously, having shaved their eyebrows off and allowed their hair to pass even the worst soldier's standard" and might be seen walking around the camp with their hair up in curlers.⁷⁵

Such a person was "Skippy" at Nong Pladuk, who in Fergus Anckorn's estimation "very much considered herself female day and night. Everything she did was in the female [way]—all that. She didn't wear these dresses and things [offstage]; she was [an] ordinary soldier."⁷⁶

Or Vilhelm Vanderdecken in the hospital camp at Nakhon Pathom, who "always played the part of an exotic woman—and a good looking one," Benjamin Dunn observed. "A lot of guys whistled at him and he seemed not to mind. He even had a big Dutch boyfriend who was with him constantly."⁷⁷ Earlier, he had appeared in shows at Tamarkan where G. F. Kershaw had been particularly taken with his attractiveness as one of the court maidens in the pantomime *Aladdin*: "He looked the part of a young and attractive female, both in dress and deportment, and when he brought cigarettes to the hospital after the show it was a study in psychology to see the number of men who pressed him to sit beside them, and all those who made any

excuse to touch him, although all knew him to be a man.”⁷⁸

These female impersonators teased the imaginations of the men with their ability to create the illusion of the glamorous female while, at the same time, they flirted with the revelation of their own sexual orientation by incorporating homosexual code words or employing multiple entendre in skits and songs.

*I'm Lady Medusa, a Social Who's-Whoser,
I married the Governor last week.
I traveled out steerage, me mind on a peerage,
And now I'm half-way — so to speak —
At Government House parties they say I'm a pest,
But Coward preferred me above all the rest*⁷⁹

This excerpt from “Biggles” Bywaters’ witty lyrics for a show in Kanburi Officers’ Camp offers a good example of the use of multiple entendre with homosexual subtext. The initial implication of these lyrics about an extramarital affair between the female singer and Noel Coward, who toured the Far East before the war, was “doubled” into a second and more audacious implication when a male actor in drag sang about an affair with Coward, who was known to be gay.

A Dangerous Game

A certain level of joking and teasing about homosexuality could be tolerated in the POW camps, just as it probably had been earlier in the soldiers’ lives. During his investigation of how American army inductees in basic training dealt with their first encounter of an all-male society, Bérubé concluded that the homosexual banter and horseplay he noted in the barracks “defused secret fears through laughter, and it reassured the men that their uncomfortable feelings were common rather than queer.”⁸⁰

But teasing was one thing; actual participation in homosexual activity was another. In the military, punishment for this behavior meant jail time and a dishonorable discharge. Still, such serious consequences didn’t necessarily prove a deterrent. “The latter factor [sexual activity], however, is fortunately little apparent here, with the lowering diet and lack of propinquity and stimulation,” wrote John Milford in Chungkai, “though I have heard it said that opportunity is not altogether lacking for those who are bold—and not fastidious.”⁸¹

A prevalent lack of “fastidiousness” was confirmed by Fergus Anckorn:

*An awful lot of homosexuality going in all these camps—all over the place. Oh, plenty of it went on. But, in a way, it was a lot of the married people. And it was just a matter of, well, we’ve got no wife, let’s get someone else. And they weren’t ravishing homosexuals in any way; it was that we’ll have to make do with this. And there again, that was quite accepted, or not looked at. And nothing much was made of it.*⁸²

Anckorn may be overstating the case here. Most POWs who served on the Thailand-Burma Railway would categorically deny that any such activity went on in the camps. Based on his own experience, Chalker asserted,

What is interesting in retrospect is that homosexuality never entered into our daily existence—or that most of us were quite unaware of it.^{xiv}

What was rather magical was the constant evidence of great tenderness between appallingly sick and dying men, when trying to ease fearful pain and bringing comfort—washing a skeletal neighbour down when covered in faeces, and so on. This we do remember, but this was sheer human kindness in heart-breaking conditions.⁸³

But Terence Charley's observations about the sexual activity in Kanburi Officers' Camp in 1945 are more in agreement with Anckorn's above: "It was in Kanburi that one noticed that sex was beginning to rear its ugly head and from this I deduced that there is probably no such thing as a completely heterosexual person. One noticed little liaisons blossoming even amongst those who, as soon as they were let out, rushed to the comfort of the married bed."⁸⁴

John Sharp's diary also reveals what was taking place in Kachu Mountain Aerodrome Camp in June, 1945, among POWs who had been imprisoned together for far too long.

29.6. One of the M.O's declares that there have been four cases of 'navy-cake' [sodomy] reported to the police this month. He surprised two participants himself, behind the dysentery latrine—but, being a gentleman, he coughed and passed on. He condoned the practice.^{xv} He spoke also of the difficulty of preventing blanket-drill [masturbation] in the hospitals—at Chungkai he checked one man on the danger-list in the morning, and caught him at it again at 1 p.m.; he was dead at 3 p.m.⁸⁵

Though no official report would ever admit it, after years of isolated incarceration there seems to have been some level of turning a blind eye to what is known in penal studies as situational homosexual behavior. Some female impersonators may have been instrumental in prompting such behavior, but no camp gossip has surfaced that suggests they ever actively engaged in it. Yet comments about "protectors" or being accompanied by "big boyfriends" might suggest that some female impersonators were not simply concerned about what their actions onstage might provoke offstage.

^{xiv} Even though there are rumors that many hearts were broken at Nakhon Pathom when the officers were sent away to the all-officers' camp at Kanburi.

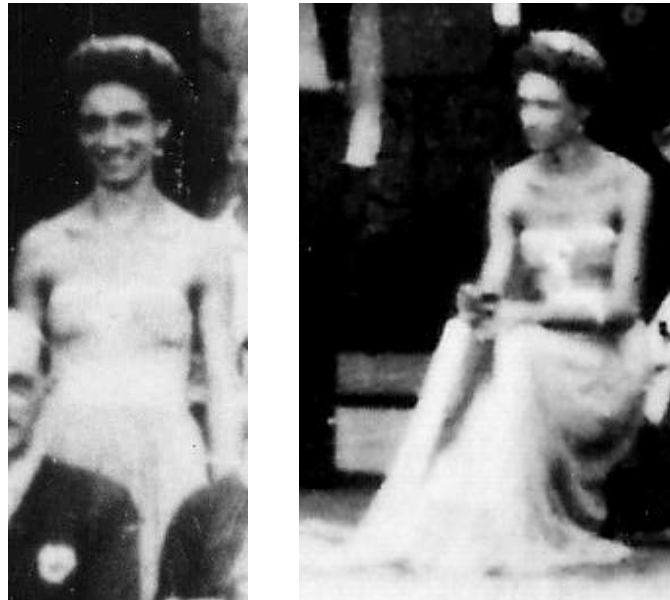
^{xv} This is exactly what Sharp wrote in the carefully handwritten redaction of his original diary.

“The Uncomparable Bobbie”

Of all of the glamorous “illusionists” in the Thailand POW camps, it was British artilleryman Private Bobby Spong who became “a camp legend”: the best-known and best-loved female impersonator on the railway.⁸⁶ Since there is more mention of Spong in the diaries and memoirs of men who were there than any of the other female impersonators, it is possible to assemble a profile of Spong both as a person and as a performer.

According to Chalker, “Spong had a slender build, was more sophisticated, naturally elegant and made-up easily and exceptionally well.”⁸⁷ Durnford called his figure “thin but eloquent.”⁸⁸ And John Cosford, who had been Spong’s hut-mate in Tamarkan, remarked that Spong was “an extraordinary fellow and so completely feminine in his habits that I often found him most embarrassing. . . . He would spend a great deal of time over his teeth and hair, talked like a girl—‘Oh dear, mother’s tired,’ being his favourite phrase—and was a dab hand at mending clothes. He kept a folder of ‘cuttings’ which told of his appearance on stage and for every show made out a programme with his own name on top of the bill.”⁸⁹

Unfortunately, the only visual images we have of Bobby Spong are found in the two photographs of the *Wonder Bar* show in Chungkai in May 1944 and in an illustration for a camp soccer match.



FIGURES 14.8. & 14.9. IMAGES OF BOBBY SPONG. DETAILS FROM THE *Wonder Bar* PHOTOGRAPHS. COURTESY OF MARTIN PERCIVAL.

Though indistinct, the two close-up details show a young lissome figure in a strapless evening gown. His head with its oval face sits atop a slender neck set off by abundant Brunette hair which has been pulled into an upsweep. As a major female impersonator, Spong had been allowed to let his Brunette hair grow long. To complete the illusion of his femininity, he also shaved parts of his body that would be revealed by the outfits he wore. “When [Spong] shaved his hairy chest and legs, and dressed as a woman,” Cosford declared, “it was difficult to believe he wasn’t the genuine article.”⁹⁰ His strapless evening gown displays his prominent clavicle bones, bare shoulders, and slender arms—and as it is gathered between his legs in **Figure 14.9**, shapely calves.

Bobby Spong Onstage

Unlike other female impersonators like John “Nellie” Wallace who always played in a campy acting style noted by Tom Morris as “slightly outrageously overacted,”⁹¹ Spong did not resort to exaggerated vocalizations, movements, or gestures onstage to convince his audiences that he was playing a woman. The qualifier used repeatedly in diaries, memoirs, and interviews to describe Spong’s physical demeanor on stage is *natural*. For example, Durnford called his “variety of feminine gestures . . . both natural and amusing yet not broadly-burlesque or exaggerated.”⁹² It was this “naturalness” that Hugh de Wardener most admired about him:

*I remember Bobby Spong because he was so attractive. He really was. He was utterly feminine, utterly. And utterly relaxed in it. It suited him. But Bobby was a good actor, too. I mean, he was utterly at ease in the part. . . . He didn't overdo it [at] all. He did it perfectly . . . it was his relaxed, utterly natural stance which I remember so well.*⁹³

Frank Samethini recalled that the “uncomparable Bobbie’s [*sic*]” first appearance on stage in a show always got a rise out of the audience: “The curtain goes up. Bobbie appears swaying his hips amidst catcalls.”⁹⁴ But in Chalker’s memory, it wasn’t catcalls but cheers that were raised every time Bobby appeared.⁹⁵ Wade noted that during his performances, Spong “could roll his big eyes wickedly and time his silences most skillfully.”⁹⁶

Spong had first become well known as a solo performer—a singer-comedienne—in “The Mumming Bees” concert party productions back in Changi POW camp, Singapore. His repertoire included impersonations of famous female stage and film entertainers, like the British comedienne Beatrice Lillie and the German film star Marlene Dietrich, singing songs like “Love for Sale,” “Falling in Love Again,” and “See What the Boys in the Back Room Will Have.”⁹⁷ Another performer he loved to imitate was the renowned 1930s British female impersonator Douglas Byng, who sang songs liberally salted with multiple entendres, like “No-one Loves a Fairy When She’s Forty.”⁹⁸ Spong’s singing voice was, to John Durnford’s ears at least, “of Sophie Tucker proportions and huskiness.”⁹⁹

It was in “The Mumming Bees” productions and the weekend *Café Colette* shows in Changi where Spong first branched out as an actor in comedy sketches and revues. When he appeared on the makeshift stage on the final night of the notorious Selarang Incident “magnificently dressed as a woman, the roar that went up from that square must have been heard all over the island.”¹⁰⁰

As Frank Samethini reported, Spong’s versatility as a singer, dancer, and “actress” reached its apex in the POW camps in Thailand:

On stage, the men say, he is superb in depicting whatever type of woman would be required for the situation, moving about in a variety of dresses from a flimsy nightie to a plunging neckline evening gown. In most cases the script requires a young frivolous wench caught in a web of naughty innuendo or straight out dirty jokes applauded by a roaring audience. Sometimes at the finish of the show he would convincingly figure in the sacred role of the soldier’s

wife waving good-bye to her slowly backward stepping husband, departing for war, while the orchestra plays a heart-rendering, “When the Poppies Bloom Again.”¹⁰¹

Others, like Tom Boardman, also wrote glowingly of his acting abilities: “[Spong] always gave of his best and ‘lived’ every part he was given.”¹⁰² Chalker called him “the supreme ‘actress.’”¹⁰³

It had long been the tradition in military concert parties for female impersonators to take responsibility for getting their own costumes together and for transporting the articles wherever they went. When Spong unpacked his kit, Cosford saw that “[Spong] carried a full set of ladies attire with him and for his stage appearances would wear a complete woman’s rig-out, roll on corsets and all. It amazed me how he had managed to keep it all and carry it about with him, because apart from his entertainment appearances he was like the rest of us, ‘Jap Happy’^{xvi} or tattered shorts and precious little else.”¹⁰⁴

John Coast offers a verbal snapshot of Spong in his ladies’ underwear backstage in the dressing room prior to a performance: “Bobby, the leading lady, has a wardrobe of his own, including scanties which he has made himself. You see him now made-up and patting his hair, walking up and down in a pair of light blue silk panties, looking at himself in the mirror.”¹⁰⁵

Competition over the quality and extent of their dress and underwear collections was supposedly the reason Bobby got into a feud with Joqui [“Jackie”] Steenhuizen,^{xvii} the most stunning of the N.E.I. female impersonators in Chungkai. “There is too much bad blood between the ‘girls,’” Samethini revealed. “Some say because of an instant mutual dislike, others say jealousy of their personal wardrobe had been the cause for the feud.”¹⁰⁶

But the real quarrel between Spong and “Jackie” wasn’t over who had the most extensive wardrobe; it was a contest over who was going to be recognized as the best female impersonator in Chungkai. Which one of them would receive the most wolf whistles and wild applause from audiences because “she” exuded the most sexual allure?

Bobby Spong Offstage

Spong was one of those female impersonators who enjoyed playing his role wherever and whenever he had opportunity. He was given to understand that his offstage acting played an important part in the POWs’ psychological rehabilitation. One place he performed was in the hospital wards for those who were too sick to be brought to the theatre to see the shows. Leofric Thorpe wrote that Spong loved doing these “hut shows”: “And he used to go round singing numbers and so on, and adjust the people’s moods with his jokes.”¹⁰⁷ Cosford noticed that, during his “individual turns in the wards,” Spong would sometimes “sit on patients’ beds looking so much like a woman that they would blush and attempt to cover their nakedness.”¹⁰⁸

Spong was apparently a good sport and game for anything. On 29 April 1944, when one of the shows was suddenly cancelled because the Japanese had taken all the theatrical paraphernalia to Kanburi to put on a show of their own in celebration of the emperor’s birthday, Spong participated in a hastily arranged burlesque soccer match to ensure that the men would still have some sort of entertainment to attend on their *yasume* day.

^{xvi} The everyday outfit for men in the camp was the Japanese undergarment called a *fundoshi*, which the POWs called a “G-string” or a “Jap Happy.”

^{xvii} Frank Samethini misremembered the name as “Johnny.”



FIGURE 14.10. NOTICE FOR SOCCER MATCH. IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

Notices for the soccer match posted around the camp are illustrated with an image of Bobby Spong in yellow halter top and shorts standing in a red V (for “Victory,” of course) with his foot on the ball.

But it was Spong’s two offstage appearances during the 1943 Christmas holidays where he made his biggest splash. On Christmas Day, he was among the entertainers who visited the hospital wards to hand out gifts to the patients. One of those patients, Stanley Gimson, wrote, “I saw Bobby Spong, looking ‘smashing’ in light green and orange frock and hat, causing a sensation as he distributes cigarettes, escorted by Mark Quinn in a natty grey suit.”¹⁰⁹

His second appearance was at the race track event on New Year’s Day. These race track meets were a time for everyone in the camp to dress up and role-play. An oval racetrack was created with the camp band in the center playing appropriate music. There was a paddock where the “horses” could be evaluated and enclosures where the POWs could circulate dressed not in their everyday “Jap-Happies” but in the best clothes they had left in their kits. There were jockeys in “silks” made from sarongs and other bits of colored cloth and a tote board for placing bets. And there was Bobby. “Bob appeared dressed in a floppy Ascot bonnet, and a long, chiffon-type dress of mosquito-netting, to parade the enclosures with a parasol, leaning negligently on the arm of two other members of the ‘theatrical profession,’ splendid in tail and grey toppers,” noted Durnford.¹¹⁰ The day ended with Spong under a large tree, accompanied by an accordion player, giving a cabaret performance of songs from Douglas Byng’s repertoire.¹¹¹

Others found Spong’s antics that day unacceptable. A soldier appearing as a female onstage could be acknowledged as a necessity but functioning in that capacity offstage challenged the heterosexual norm. Captain C. D. L. Aylwin was greatly upset that fellow officers, including their camp commandant, accepted Spong’s cross-dressing and behavior: “There was a big hospital sweepstake on one of the races drawn by Colonel Owtram and ‘Miss Bobby Spong,’ the actress. The latter dressed in the latest creation of Chungkai and with [Lieutenant] Quinn, dressed in a light sandy coloured suit looking like a pimp (it made me want to vomit to see him)—as her beau, stood self consciously in the ‘paddock’ watching events.”¹¹² Lieutenant James Richardson thought Bobby’s actions really crossed a line when he ended up “kissing the winners of

races. All rather distasteful!"¹¹³

Some of the other ranks exhibited uneasiness with Spong's "feminine" presence and behavior offstage as well. In further comments on his story of how Spong affected the patients when he sat on their hospital beds, Cosford added, "I could remember their feelings for I myself, who knew him so well, often felt most awkward in his company."¹¹⁴

Other Reactions to Bobby Spong

When thinking or writing about "Bobby" in their diaries or memoirs, it is obvious from the examples already given that many of the POWs experienced Spong offstage or on not as a male performer in drag but, in de Wardener's words, as "utterly feminine, utterly."¹¹⁵ Major Leofric Thorpe, who first gave Spong the opportunity to perform in "The Mummie Bees" shows in Changi, wrote that he always thought of Bobby Spong "as a young woman."¹¹⁶ Fergus Anckorn agreed, stating, "there's no way you could tell that he wasn't a woman."¹¹⁷ And they weren't the only ones taken in by the illusion. W. G. Riley remembered an incident that happened during Spong's re-appearance onstage at Chungkai late in 1943 after he had returned from a work camp up the line: "His feminine mannerisms and act was so convincing, that on his first appearance in this role . . . the Japs attending the concert . . . were so convinced that he was female, that they stopped the show and made him prove his manhood!"¹¹⁸

As was true of other female impersonators in the camps, especially those who worked hard to create the frisson of seeing glamorous, attractive women on stage, Bobby Spong's appearances always provoked sexual responses in his audience. This reaction had been true from his earliest performances back in Changi, even from such POWs as Richardson, who would later decry Spong's behavior at Chungkai: "Bobby Spong as a girl—very good (a luscious, seductive bitch who always looks like a forthright whore!)."¹¹⁹ Wade recalled a statement by an unidentified POW in Changi: "I had a wonderful dream about Bobby Spong last night."¹²⁰ And Thorpe, following up on his remark about always seeing Spong as female, admitted, "Perhaps it was just as well that after some months without the correct vitamins etc in the diet all sexual urges vanished!"¹²¹ But that was Changi in 1942, not Thailand in 1944, when those urges returned.

In Chungkai, "Fizzer" Pearson, who played the male lead opposite Spong in Somerset Maugham's comedy *The Circle*, was overheard quipping, "I could have had Bobby last night, balls or not balls!"¹²² And John Coast, who as stage manager watched Spong from the wings during a performance of one-act plays, exclaimed, "the leading lady, Bobby Spong, looked as bed-worthy as many of his opposite sex."¹²³

As was true of the other female impersonators, Cosford believed that "more than one [Japanese] fancied [Spong] in his female attire."¹²⁴ Durnford recalled that the Japanese and Koreans frequently asked Spong to give private performances for them in their quarters. And he did: "Accepting gracefully inducements of fruit and cigarettes from the lascivious 'apes,' he would slip neatly out of their grasp and fly over the padang in the moonlight to the safety of his own hut."¹²⁵

All of this, of course, fueled speculation about Spong's own sexual orientation. Anckorn mused, "I suspect that he was slightly gay . . . but he really was wonderful."¹²⁶ When asked about this possibility, Hugh de Wardener said, "Whether he was a homosexual or not, I don't know . . . he probably had inclinations that way. . . . I'm sure he had several admirers who might have tried something on him. And I don't know if anything was going on at all."¹²⁷

Spong's Final Appearances

Spong's portrayal of "the Follies Girl," Mirabelle Swam, in Leo Britt's production of the musical *Wonder Bar* in mid-May 1944 was a singular triumph. It was also his penultimate appearance in Chungkai. Following the final performance, Spong shocked everyone by volunteering for a Japan Party draft. He did so, it was understood, because "his pal Vic Marshall" had been placed on the draft, and he wanted "to stick" with him.¹²⁸

His last show in Chungkai was *Café Colette*, a revival of the show he had performed back in Changi. As usual, it contained sketches loaded with salacious humor, multiple entendre, and sexual byplay. James Richardson was outraged by the antics of the two prostitutes (one of whom was Spong) depicted on stage: "culturally in the gutter, quite the worst creatures, almost I've ever seen prancing on the stage,"¹²⁹

What elicited Richardson's negative response this time isn't known. Others found the show "very amusing" and "a fine musical."¹³⁰ For his swan song, Spong may have thrown caution to the wind and given one of those drag performances that Bérubé witnessed in some of the American "soldier shows" that "undermined the audience's heterosexual assumptions" with the result that "spectators sometimes became offended and hostile, reviewers attacked the show as obscene, authorities closed the show and arrested the actors, and, in the military, discharged the soldier-performers, as homosexuals."¹³¹

Almost casually, John Sharp mentions a poignant detail about Spong's preparation for his departure in his diary entry for 5 June: "Our leading lady has joined a Japan Party, and had her hair off."¹³²

The Japan Party left on 8 June. Spong and Marshall, and most of the thirteen hundred other POWs crammed in the hold of the Japanese transport ship, did not survive the long and dangerous sea voyage to Japan. Their unmarked ship was spotted and sunk by an American submarine trying to disrupt the Japanese supply routes. Frank Samethini, who left Chungkai on an earlier Japan Party, heard news about Spong's fate from the few survivors after they arrived in Yakkaichi POW Camp, Japan:

It is disclosed that among the drowned comrades there is one called Bobbie [sic], "the gorgeousest phony-broad this side of Suez," [who] had gone down with twenty frocks in his rucksacks. That could only be the "uncomparable Bobbie" who so well portrayed "woman," the throb of many men's dreams in those days of the great concerts in Chungkai. Poor Bobbie.¹³³

Though Spong had been forced to have his long Brunette hair shaved off before departure, with "twenty frocks in his rucksacks," he was obviously determined to take up his responsibilities as a female impersonator once again at his new destination.

W. G. Riley believed Bobby Spong "deserved a decoration for his services as an entertainer and morale booster to so many of his fellow P.O.W.s. Alas, it is to my belief," he wrote, "that he was denied this honour by losing his life in tragic circumstances."¹³⁴

* * *

If J. G. Fuller's assessment about the worth of female impersonators in military concert parties behind the lines in the First World War—that the real significance of their popularity had been their "glamour" and "trappings of elegance and luxury," which were seen as "the negation of war and squalor and, as such, a potent fetish of peace"¹³⁵—is valid, then how much more so was this the case for the POWs in their isolated camps in Burma and Thailand during the Second World War?

Yet this intellectualization dismisses the audience's complex emotional reactions to the female impersonators' audacious physical presence. "In reality," writes Boxwell, "the spectacle does not involve the simple suspension of disbelief that the 'woman' is actually a man. Rather, a simultaneous and conterminous process of avowal and disavowal never loses sight of the fact that the female impersonator is always-also a man, never not-just a woman."¹³⁶ The experience of the "double," which is at the heart of theatre, combined with "the intensity of their desire to believe"¹³⁷ may have prompted the POWs to momentarily forget that these "girls" were men. But it also prompted them to forget, if only for a few hours, that the shows were being performed in atap and bamboo theatres.

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Chapter 15: “To Keep Going the Spirit”

What Music and Theatre Meant to the POWs

“To keep going the Spirit that kept us going.”

—motto of British FEPOW organization

In January 1945 at Chungkai hospital camp, G. E. Chippington heard disturbing rumors about the fate of the camp’s theatre:

The Japanese have ordered the demolition of the theatre. They have taken exception to the enjoyment we all derive from what have been truly magnificent productions of the highest quality displaying unsuspected talent in every department from the actual production, the acting and singing right through to the scenery, lighting, props, and even the posters. They have enabled us, if only for a brief moment, to escape from the harsh realities of this unreal life into that other civilized world from which we came and to which one day we hope to return.

The order to demolish the theatre is yet another humiliating admission of defeat on the part of the Japanese. They cannot destroy the spirit which created and gave rise to our theatre—so, their answer, destroy the fabric, the bits and pieces of the theatre—the inanimate expression of that spirit they have failed to conquer.¹

Fortunately for Chippington and the others at Chungkai, the rumors proved false. But his eloquent testimony in defense of their theatre’s worth encapsulates the various themes found in this final consideration of the ways in which music and theatre served as strategies for survival.

Other Strategies for Survival

Many activities were devised by the POWs to fill their few hours of free time between the evening meal and lights out. These included writing secret diaries, reading, playing chess or cards, *kongsi* discussionsⁱ and writing groups, hut lectures, and chapel services. One activity that benefitted John Lane was participation in the chapel choir. “[T]he existence of the choir,” he wrote, “was a tremendous psychological boost that helped us to ward off the danger of depression.”²

ⁱ A hut interest group.



FIGURE 15.1. POW [STANLEY GIMSON], CHUNGKAI THAILAND, JANUARY 1944. ASHELY GEORGE OLD. IWM ART COLLECTION. COURTESY OF THE FAMILY OF STANLEY GIMSON.

An activity much in evidence was making art. “My paints, too, helped tremendously,” wrote Norman Pritchard of how producing souvenir programs and set designs helped him survive.³ For us, these artifacts offer a compelling documentation of the lives of the POWs on the Thailand-Burma railway. But for the POWs, the artwork served as material witness to living memory. This point was explicitly made by Ray Parkin about the artwork he produced on the railway: “I feel if I can get them back the experience will not be entirely wasted. Memory is not enough.”⁴

But doing art and the other free-time activities listed were singular or small-group endeavors; large-group activities, such as sports and entertainment, were initiated to engage everyone’s time and attention. As there wasn’t always the energy to play games, few accounts of participation in sports are encountered in the POW literature.ⁱⁱ By contrast, as we’ve seen, there are numerous entries regarding entertainment, and the historical narrative records the parts played by the many officers and other ranks who participated in its production.

“The Enemy Within”

The ways in which camp entertainment proved beneficial to the POWs against the uncertainty, boredom, and despair that bedeviled their lives wasn’t only felt during the performances themselves but extended to the times beforehand and afterward as well.

Before Performances

Passage of Time/Calendar. Among the seemingly mundane benefits of camp entertainment

ⁱⁱ There are accounts of soccer matches at Nong Pladuk and cricket matches at Nakhon Pathom. And, of course, “race days,” when camps were turned into theme parks with people dressed in appropriate costumes for re-creations of the holiday horse races at Ascot or Melbourne.

was that weekly performances helped the POWs track the passage of time. “Quite miss the concerts,” W. W. Marsh wrote when entertainment at Chungkai stopped because the theatre was flooded by monsoon rains: “They serve as a land mark from week to week & one knows better which day is which.”⁵ In the day-to-day sameness of prison camp life, this benefit was not insignificant.

“**A night out.**” Of more value was the notion that going to a show was a special occasion—something to anticipate and plan for—expressed by an anonymous soldier in Changi POW camp, Singapore, early in their captivity:

We had not many clothes but in those days most of us had a second shirt and pair of shorts which we carefully kept for best. Some even had khaki slacks which had been issued in India. And we all had forage caps. These were all kept carefully pressed and when it was our turn to go to the theatre—for we had to take it in turns—we dressed very carefully, washed and shaved meticulously, cleaned our shoes, wore puttees. It was a night out.⁶

Two years later, attending the theatre Up Country was still considered a special event. “I think each concert was an occasion that I looked forward to with a great deal of anticipation,” wrote Tom Morris about Tamarkan, “and I was never once disappointed at what I saw.”⁷ Entertainment’s once-a-week break in the tedious daily routine is what Jack Chalker thought made it so important. “I mean, it was the one spot that people had to look forward to during the week,” he explained. “And then everybody came out for it. This was a day out, or an evening out, isn’t it?”ⁱⁱⁱ⁸

During Performances

Escape. The idea that entertainment provided a means of escape—even if only temporary—was recognized as its greatest benefit. As the POWs lived in a world where physical escape was deemed impossible,^{iv} mental and emotional escape became all the more important. With phrases such as “taken out of myself,” or “took me right away,” or “took them into another world,” the POWs expressed the liberating effect musical and theatrical performances had on them. As Chippington’s testimony at the opening of this chapter suggests, the nature of this escape was paradoxical. It involved a forgetting and a remembering, an “escape from” as well as an “escape into.”

The POWs’ longing to escape from the monotony of everyday life in the confines of their prison camps continued throughout the three and a half years of their captivity. But what the POWs on the railway endured during “the Speedo” pushed that need to the breaking point. E. R. Hall’s account of that time is typical:

. . . and then the rains and speedo work came. The hospital camp at the 55 Kilo mark, Kohn Kuhn,^v was the worst camp I was in. The incessant rain, the sickness all round us and the slow monotonous notes of the seemingly endless soundings

ⁱⁱⁱ “A night out” and “a day out” are common British expressions for an anticipated experience that would be very worthwhile or for one that had proven so. Since many of the POW performances took place during the day, the term “a night out” was used metaphorically.

^{iv} Although for most of their captivity Up Country there were only flimsy bamboo fences penning them in (that is, until moats and bunds were ordered built around the camps), an unfamiliar environment, a civilian population where most POWs could not blend in easily, and knowledge that the few POWs who had tried to escape were caught and executed inhibited further attempts.

^v On the Burma side of the railway construction.

of the Last Post as we buried the dead left us morbid and unforgiving. I suffered from an excess of men and a feeling of disgust caused by a state of being satiated with their presence. I was tired of men—sick men, dying men, men talking, laughing, swearing and eating rice, men sleeping, near naked men, groaning and screaming men as they suffered; Australian men, English men, American men, white and brown Dutch men, Japanese men—they all irritated me and I longed for a change. A prisoner of war asked a chaplain if he still believed in “goodwill toward all men” and he replied “No. They are not men any longer.”⁹

To endure this hell, most POWs resorted to what J. Blattner, writing about an even more horrific German concentration camp context, called “the animal need to survive”:

The prisoners mind[set], the moral and philosophical decisions that had formed identity, were no longer of use. All they could rely on was the animal need to survive. In short the Nazis aimed to create a victim who was nothing more than a beast. All human value was extirpated. Only the power to work, the fear of pain, the ability to obey, and the will to live survived.¹⁰

Forswearing their capacity in caring for anything other than their own survival, the POWs on the railway “hardened their hearts” against their fellow prisoners. Ernest Gordon described how this was done:

When a man is dying we had no word of mercy. When he cried out for help, we averted our heads. Men cursed the Japanese, their neighbors, themselves, and God. Cursing became such an obsession that they constructed whole sentences in which every word was a curse.¹¹

But during “the Speedo” there was no escape, as there were no performances of music or theatre to offer respite. By late 1943, when the major railway construction was finished, the POWs needed to escape not only from the disease and death rampant in the overcrowded camps but from memories of their inhumanity as well.

Once the entertainers among them were able to regain their strength, the music and theatre they produced allowed the POWs to retreat into imaginative worlds where restoration to wholeness could begin. Such was G. E. Chippington’s experience when he attended the pantomime at Takanun/223 Kilo during Christmas 1943:

But, as I sat there under that canopy of stars and watched the pantomime just for a short while I forgot all about the Japanese and the railway, the sweat, the suffering and the pain and those who died. Just a rough and ready, makeshift pantomime by a bunch of amateurs who have probably never performed on a stage before in their whole lives—yet, for a brief moment, in the middle of our dark jungle, they brought us a shaft of light, a breath of freedom.

Afterwards, when I rolled myself in my blanket and settled down to sleep, I found my heart strangely refreshed.¹²

Camaraderie/Solidarity. The entertainment produced in hospital and relocation camps during 1944 restored the POWs' capacity for empathy and camaraderie lost during "the Speedo." In the collective sharing of weekly entertainment, a solidarity emerged in which each POW could feel he was not alone in fighting against "the enemy within" or "the enemy without."

Testimony

[Music and theatre] lifted our spirits immeasurably—something to look forward to! The "flattening" of people's feelings when they were cancelled was very obvious—there was little else. After years of slavery on the Railway, appalling treatment, few drugs, medical supplies non-existent, food appalling, chronic illness, cholera, the mental strain of believing our terrible lifestyle would ever end & that we would be freed & not dispatched by our captors—the endless "boghole" rumours. Morale was getting low & it took its toll on most ranks. Some diversion was essential—the precious short time you sat, enjoyed, laughed, sang & forgot were magic!¹³

**Fred Ransome Smith
Cartoonist and Set Designer**

After Performances

"Made men talk." Beyond the immediate sharing that took place in audiences during a show, performances gave the prisoners new topics for conversation, jokes to recall, and music to sing. "The catchy tunes of the eighteen nineties were sung and whistled all over the camp for weeks afterwards," observed Major Jim Jacobs about the effects Norman Carter's revue *Memories of the Gay 90s* had on the troops at Tamarkan.^{vi14}

Sense of accomplishment. Attending a concert party not only gave POWs the escape of a good night out, it also gave them something more that was psychologically important. Following a performance

^{vi} That is, until a year later, when whistling was forbidden at Kanburi Officers' Camp [Jacobs, 140].

at Changi early in their captivity, artist Murray Griffin wrote, you “come back in the semi-dark with the grand feeling of having achieved something.”^{vii}

“To lessen animosity.” Entertainment also came to play an important role in reducing national and ethnic rivalries and prejudices among the British, Australian, Dutch, and American troops. More importantly, it helped to lessen racial prejudice against the *indische jorgens* (mixed-race) or fully Indonesian Netherlands East Indies’ POWs through the integration of camp orchestras, separate Dutch/Indonesian musical and theatrical productions, and the appearance of performers from different nationalities and races in each other’s shows. As a consequence, some POWs became intensely interested in learning languages and understanding forms of music and dance previously unknown to them.

John Sharp thought that the entertainment may also have had some moderating effect on their treatment by their captors. “A side issue,” he wrote, “was that the camp guards attended and perhaps appreciated (without understanding) the performances and their presence in a relaxed atmosphere may have contributed in some measure to lessen animosity towards the prisoners. I believe that the Group Commandant (Colonel Yanagida) permitted the singing of the British and the Dutch national anthems.”^{viii}



FIGURE 15.2. “ROLL CALL.” KEES VAN WILLIGEN.
IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE,
NETHERLANDS.

“The Enemy Without”

Besides momentary escape from the enemy within, POW diaries, memoirs, and artifacts disclose that entertainment also abetted their efforts to deal with the outer world, including their Japanese captors..

Resistance

Entertainment provided the POWs with an opportunity for resistance, and the entertainers became the front-line troops in this covert war. Witnessed collectively and publicly, derogatory comments about their captors in jokes, songs, and sketches, strengthened everyone’s resolve to fight on. The trick

^{vii} Strictly against orders from Imperial Japanese Army headquarters.

on the entertainers' part was, of course, not to get caught. With Japanese commandants and their staffs, including the censors who had vetted the scripts, sitting in front rows, avoiding detection wasn't always easy.

Approval for concert parties on the railway was given by Japanese commanders with the understanding that they would attend as well. And deference must be paid to their presence. Shows could not start until they were seated. They would be the last to arrive and the first to leave, and when they did, POW audiences had to stand and bow in their direction.

Guards, usually Korean conscripts, were stationed at the back and along the sides of auditoria to watch the audience for any signs of unrest. Sometimes a show's content proved just too much of a draw for the guards' attention. From his vantage point at the back of the audience, John Sharp watched as two guards on duty were slapped by a Japanese officer for watching the provocative antics of the "two fucking tarts" in *Café Colette* and not the audience, as assigned.^{viii17}

"To take the piss out." The record of entertainment on the railway is replete with attempts by entertainers "to take the piss out" of the Japanese through all the verbal and visual means available in their performers' toolkits. A summary of their techniques described in the literature includes allusions and coded [slang] phrases in songs and sketches mocking their captors' racial, physical, and cultural differences, as well as nonverbal gestures and vocal *pointing*^{ix}—possibilities not apparent to Japanese censors when they read the scripts submitted for approval. Like techniques were also used to inform POW audiences of the latest war news heard on secret radios. When the entertainers succeeded in their subterfuge, it gave POW audiences sitting behind the Japanese "little victories" to to celebrate surreptitiously. As the Japanese caught on to these techniques, they tried to put a stop to them, but, as the historical narrative shows, this only challenged brave entertainers to concoct ever more clever ways to outwit them.

No theatre produced on the Thailand-Burma railway dealt directly with the Japanese captors or the men's lives as POWs. That was forbidden. But from the record of what shows were banned by censors at Nong Pladuk and elsewhere, it appears the Japanese suspected the POWs might be addressing those subject indirectly. They were right.

"In the face of the enemy." The POWs came to realize that performances in themselves were acts of resistance no matter what the content. On the way back to his hut after his brother Han's accordion concert, Frank Samethini was struck by an idea: in attending the performance, "had they not, for a little while at least, beaten the enemy?"¹⁸ Two performers agreed. "[I]t was something, perhaps, you did in the face of the enemy, you know," said Jack Chalker. "And I think that was quite wonderful."¹⁹ For drummer Wally Davis, "The shows went on as usual partly for morale and also to let the Japanese know they still could not break that Spirit that kept us going."²⁰ As Chippington indicates, nothing symbolized the POWs' resistance and "the Spirit that kept [them] going" more than their theatre.^x

viii See Chapter 6: "Chungkai Showcase," Part Two.

ix Pointing is a verbal technique whereby the actor hesitates briefly before an important word or phrase to make the audience listen to what follows more attentively.

x Some of the most startling information to come to light during the investigation into entertainment on the Thailand-Burma railway is the extent to which the Japanese came to depend on the POWs' entertainment for their survival as well. Only two Japanese entertainment units—a military band and a film projection crew—are recorded in the FEPOW records touring the construction camps to boost Japanese soldiers' morale. These were clearly not enough to keep I. J. A. troops happy in remote postings, so in addition to the POW shows there are several instances noted in which the Japanese mounted their own variety shows in emulation of the POWs'. At other times, command performances were ordered in which POWs grudgingly performed alongside Japanese soldiers to improve everyone's morale.

In the proliferation of POW entertainment that took place in the hospital and relocation camps during 1944, the Japanese found relief from their own boredom, though they had the opportunity for R & R trips to Kanchanaburi or even Bangkok. Two Japanese commandants gave the POW musicians special treatment because of their own personal interest in music. Taking a page from the POWs' efforts at maintaining morale, the I. J. A. headquarters at Kanburi ordered their troops stationed in the area to compete in an entertainment contest. The scenic technicians at Chungkai found themselves building sets for their two I. J. A. units. By late 1944/early 1945, as the war in the Pacific turned decisively against them, Japanese attitudes about POW entertainment held by commandants in the camps at Chungkai and the all-officers' camp at Kanburi changed (this was not true elsewhere). All of this is more fully detailed in the historical narrative.

Testimony

I think the concert parties were the consequence of a determination to live . . . I'd put it that way round, you know. That's why we did it. When we were surrendered we were not going to go under, you know, and that's why one did it.

And, of course, one wanted something that was fun amid all this horror, disgusting sanitary conditions, you know. I mean, it helps you to go on, doesn't it, if you can get the pleasure of people laughing at your own jokes. You know, it's a desperate day-to-day existence, you never know what's going to happen . . . you're completely at the mercy of your captors who could machine-gun the lot of you.

It was a determination to live. And the concert parties were evidence of your determination to live, you know. By doing it you were going to live if you could. I think, as it were, the concert parties could just as much come out of the necessity to fight back and to keep going as they were, you know, in terms of any great acknowledgment to serious drama.²¹

Audio



15.1

Robert Brazil
Actor and Set Designer

Valuing Music

“Whether anyone realised it or not,” wrote John Durnford, “one of the most important factors in our complete recovery at Chungkai was being able to listen to music. For music is not only the ‘food of love,’ so often quoted, but the food of the whole spirit.”²²

From the start of their imprisonment, the ability to sing, play, or listen to music was important to the POWs’ emotional health. “Music,” George McNeilly wrote, “was the means of keeping hundreds of men sane. It appealed to them in different ways, but it was a vital part in each man’s life, and added to the morale of the camp.”²³ McNeilly’s comments are about the effects the music concerts he sponsored outside the YMCA hut in Changi, Singapore, had on listeners, but they are even more relevant to the POWs on the railway. There, according to Ernest Gordon, the hunger for music seemed insatiable:

Whenever there was a performance, no one asked, “Are you going?” Everyone was going—if he could limp or crawl or hitch along on his artificial legs—or even if he couldn’t walk at all.

It was by no means unusual to see a man being carried up the incline^{xi} on a stretcher. In music was medicine for the soul.²⁴

POW records show that many instrumental and vocal groups were formed on the Thailand-Burma railway. “The most wonderful pleasure at Chungkai was the orchestra and concert party,” wrote Basil Peacock. “Though I am no music lover, I think one of the delights in my life on our return to Chungkai was hearing music being played by skilful [*sic*] musicians. Few of us had realized that music is almost a necessity.”²⁵

Testimony

This is the power of music. To me it has always been associated with friendship. It unites all sorts of people in a common bond. It is universal. It crosses all boundaries of race and belief. Whether it’s a simply strummed sentimental song like “Goldmine in the Sky” or a rousing Hungarian rhapsody or a Brahms lullaby, there is a moment in which the rest of life, the stresses and anxieties and doubts and fears, are held in suspense. This is what I believe the musician has to offer; and I have felt more rewarded by those moments of belonging to the enjoyment of an audience than by the recognition and honours that have come my way over the years.²⁶

**Herbert “Smoky” Dawson
Cowboy Singer**

First Australian Army Entertainment Unit^{xii}

Since most of the music heard by the POWs on the railway was the popular music they would have known from radio broadcasts, phonograph recordings, and films, its immediate emotional appeal evoked personal memories and encouraged camaraderie. “One could reconstruct one’s life from hearing the old, oft-plugged tunes of the years before the war,” wrote Ronald Hastain after hearing such music in a Thai construction camp. “The tunes often made men talk.”²⁷ Swing music made them want to dance.

Frank Samethini’s description of his brother’s accordion performance at Chungkai is the best example in the FEPOW literature of the effect of popular music on POW psyches:^{xiii} It took place while Han was in hospital at Chungkai recuperating from malaria and leg ulcers.

^{xi} Audiences sat on an earthen slope.

^{xii} Dawson was not sent to Malaya and therefore was never a POW. He, instead, performed behind the lines at Balikpapan on Borneo.

^{xiii} A shorter version of this account appears in Chapter 6: “Chungkai Showcase,” Part One.

And so a time is set and one evening they take him [Han] to the stage on a stretcher. They place him on a chair before a large crowd assembled on the parade ground. For a moment or two his fingers run tentatively over the keyboard of his old accordion. A hush has fallen over the audience. Then—up spring and sparkle the notes, rising and tumbling down, in singles and in pairs, in chords of low and high notes like a musical fountain.

First they let him play a little while on his own, but not for long. As many times before the magic of the sweeping rhythm and harmony of his music make them burst forth into singing. The merry tune and sweet lilting ballads of an almost forgotten time glide over the parched grass. “Beautiful Dreamer, wake unto me. Starlight and dewdrops are waiting for Thee” sound over the heads of the men. “Home, home on the range” echoes against the dusty attap walls, touching the trees looming in the darkness, touching the hardened souls of these ragged, skinny people drawn together in close unity. A unity which goes beyond the boundaries of rank and standing. For now only the important thing is “Dinah” and “My Blue Heaven,” and “She’s my Lady Luck,” “Always” and more of the songs of old. But not “Home Sweet Home,” that is forbidden.

The accordion is only audible at the start of each tune, the voices taking over immediately, drowning the mechanical sound in the human voices of the one and same hope that all carry in their hearts.²⁸



FIGURE 15.3. HAN SAMETHINI IN ORCHESTRA PIT
AT CHUNGKAI. *WONDER BAR* PHOTOGRAPH DETAIL.
COURTESY OF MARTIN PERCIVAL.

In an effort to appeal to the musical tastes of all the men in their audiences, musical concerts

usually contained several “light” classical pieces, such as the selections from Gilbert and Sullivan and other well-known operettas sung at Chungkai by POW camp commandant Cary Owtram to great acclaim, or heard in the concerts Gus Harffey gave at Kanburi. At Aunganaung/105 Kilo in Burma, nursery rhymes transformed into “cod-operas” with their mix of melodies from operas, popular, and traditional music, were much appreciated:

It probably seems strange that men in that age group were so entertained by such child-like stories [wrote Ted Weller, one of the singers] but it seems the music just took them into another world and away from their miserable day to day existence, because these “plays” were very well received. . . . Just goes to prove what music will do to help anyone to stay alive.²⁹

Performances of classical music, on the other hand, presented some difficulties. Unlike popular music, classical music’s emotional appeal was not necessarily immediate. Audience members were required to listen to it more complexly, for longer duration, and to live with the uncertainty of its resolution. Fearing that many POWs who had never heard such music would be turned off by complete concerts of it, entertainment officers restricted how frequently it could be performed. They were not wrong to do so. After his experience of a few selections of classical music incorporated into a concert of other types, Geoffrey Gee was one other ranks soldier who declared, “Definitely too highbrow for the tone of this camp,”³⁰ and chose not to attend the next concert in which it was featured.

But the professionally trained musicians fervently believed that once the other, uninitiated POWs heard a full concert, they would come to appreciate it. Fergus Anckorn was an other ranks soldier who didn’t need convincing:

I’ve never been asked this: “What did you miss most?” Well, you might think of all sorts of answers, but I might as well start straight off that sex was down the list somewhere. The first thing that we missed more than anything else was music. You know, I used to imagine all day long I could hear orchestras playing, and I could visualize the violinists, the pianists playing.^{xiv31}

In fact, many POWs with no prior experience of classical music had their ears and minds opened to its value. Ian Mackintosh’s review of James Clarke’s renditions of Handel and Mendelssohn makes clear that audience responses to this type of music could be quite enthusiastic: “The really star performer is a Dr. Clarke who has a lovely tenor voice. He has obviously been well trained and always gets a tremendous ovation.”³²

Years after the war, John Durnford compared the relative value of the popular entertainment and music the men heard during captivity with that of the classical music: “The clowns, the knockabouts, the

xiv Unfortunately for Anckorn, his longing to hear classical music went unfulfilled until after the war, as he was transferred from Chungkai to Nong Pladuk before these types of concerts occurred. “And I imagine it was that,” he continued, “that got to me when, after the war, I went for the first time into a Lyons’ corner house [a pub], and there was this wonderful orchestra playing, all in white tie and tails. And it got to me to such an extent that I just burst into tears and put my head on the table. At last I could hear music again. The second thing on my list, by the way, was sugar” [Anckorn, “Recorded Answers to Questions,” 6].

ballad-singers raised our battered spirits. In the sound of great and unfamiliar music they entered new worlds of faith and imagination.”³³

Valuing Theatre

Numerous extant souvenir programs and show posters detail the astonishing assortment of theatrical forms witnessed by the POWs on the Thailand-Burma railway that included music halls, variety shows, cabarets, revues, minstrel shows, pantomimes, and plays.

Since variety theatre [American *vaudeville*] was the easiest form to produce, and the form taken by military concert parties prior to captivity, it was the type of theatre most in evidence on the railway. Mackintosh’s response to a Dutch/Indonesian revue at Chungkai explains how the kaleidoscopic array of talent in variety shows could provide enormous delight (even when performed in a foreign language):

Last night I went to a concert put on by the Dutch, they do one every month or so. It was superbly good and although nearly all the dialogue was in their own language I laughed heartily. They have a troop of acrobats who are amazing for this camp. The things they can do on a rice diet are almost incredible! Some of their balancing feats were on a very high standard. The last item on the programme was awfully good. It was entitled “A Thousand and One Nights” and featured Ali Bami [Baba?] and a few of his thieves! Two lads dressed as Nubian dancers were a howling success and with their very dark skins and truly magnificent dresses really looked the part! Where the stuff came from to make those dresses goodness knows. There was also a first rate comedian whose antics kept the whole audience in fits of laughter the entire evening. I hope they come on more frequently.³⁴



FIGURE 15.4. *1001 NIGHTS*. PETER VAN VELTHUISEN.
IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE,
NETHERLANDS.

“Large-cast revues and musical comedies, such as Norman Carter’s *Memories of the Gay 90s*, Leo Britt’s *Wonder Bar*, and Bob Gale’s *Escapado Argentino*, thrilled audiences with their music and dance and wowed them with elaborate sets and props, costumes, and lighting seemingly created out of nothing. Extended accounts in the FEPOW literature have allowed for a more detailed description of these productions in the historical narrative.

Christmas pantomimes delighted POWs with their over-the-top humor, audience participation, and memories of childhood glee. The triumph of Good over Evil had never been so meaningful.

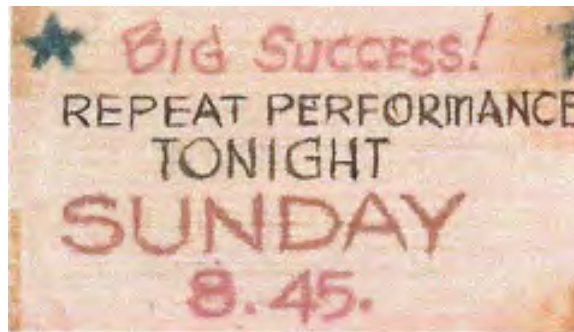


FIGURE 15.5. CAMP ANNOUNCEMENT: CHUNGKAI. IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

Straight plays^{xv} were the most challenging form of theatre to present in the camps and the most challenging for audiences to receive. They were difficult to produce because they were dependent upon the availability of scripts (whether printed or remembered), actors who could perform them, and producers with the requisite skills to direct them. Nevertheless, FEPOW records reveal that most hospital and relocation camps produced this type of theatre. Without a ready source for scripts, budding playwrights at Nong Pladuk and Nakhon Pathom wrote original mystery-thriller dramas for stage presentation.

Unlike the short duration and immediate effect of variety show acts, or the predictable plots and stereotypical characters of musical theatre, plays required audiences to follow plots involving more developed characters caught in conflict with unknown outcomes. These factors caused some concern among entertainment officers that plays might prove psychologically problematic for prisoners undergoing rehabilitation. But the reactions of POWs tell a different story. What happened at Chungkai is a case in point.

Following the belief that POWs in rehabilitation needed first of all to relearn how to laugh, the earliest plays performed at Chungkai were comedies:

The plays were mostly the sort of comedies or farces that have long runs in London’s West End [wrote Ernest Gordon]; but they brought back the tonic sound of men laughing together. This was a welcome contrast to the long months when the sullen silence was never broken except by snarls or complaints.³⁵

After witnessing one of these comedies, medical officer Patrick MacArthur wrote, “I have been to an

^{xv} Plays without music.

absolutely magnificent production of Somerset Maugham's 'The Circle' and enjoyed every moment of it."³⁶

When producer Leo Britt tested his audiences' ability to accept more intellectual and emotionally demanding content with his production of Emlyn Williams' mystery-thriller *Night Must Fall* two months later, they loved it. "We owe our theatre experts a great deal," wrote G. E. Chippington. "They feed the imagination and sustain the spirit within. We lesser mortals are grateful to them."³⁷ The audiences' clamor for more "whodunits" signaled further growth in their psychological health.

But no one on the railway produced a tragedy. Even Leo Britt's attempt to present Sutton Vane's fantasy-drama *Outward Bound*, with its shipboard of recently deceased passengers sailing to an unknown fate, caused some concern among the cast about how it would "go over" with a POW audience who had been waiting years for release from captivity.^{xvi}

Valuing Dance

Some of the most intriguing materials unearthed in the records of entertainment on the Thailand-Burma railway concern the numerous references to dance performances. Since participation in dance and exposure to its representation on stage and in films had been a huge part of the POWs' nights out prior to their captivity, it should have come as no surprise to find that dance played a significant role in their entertainment. The range of dance performances seen by the POWs included popular types such as ballroom and club, traditional and ethnic, and—most surprising of all—classical.

Watching presentations of ballroom and club dancing on stage must have given the POWs an impression of normalcy, even though the couples were men (one partner being a female impersonator). Performances of regional *Hollandsche* dances, "Sambal Sue's" hulas, and Norman Carter's incorporation of a French cancan in one show and an American Indian powwow dance in another kept memories of cultural traditions alive.

Most extraordinary was John Coast and Philip Brugman's all-dancing show *On Your Toes* that contained popular, traditional, and ethnic dances as well as a twenty-minute version of the *Sleeping Beauty* ballet. When the Indonesian dancer Tari performed his classical dances at Chungkai, the British and Australian POWs, who had never heard of, or witnessed, such dances before, were entranced. And the artistry of Philip Brugman's "Mystery of the Lotus" choreography stunned everyone with its ethereal beauty and metaphorical significance.

^{xvi} See Chapter 6: "Chungkai Showcase," Part Two.



FIGURE 15.6. "LOTUS MYSTERY." PASTEL. PETER VAN VELTHUYSEN. IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

Peter van Velthuysen's pastel sketch of the dance, drawn nearly a week after its performance, may have been his attempt, like Ray Parkin's, to capture and hold onto an extraordinary experience "because memory was not enough."

Valuing Performers

It is impossible to write about the significance of the performing arts to the POWs without mentioning the the men who did the performing—and without whom the arts could not have been experienced.^{xvii} In speaking about the impact of entertainment on his survival, Tom Morris quickly turned his attention to the performers:

*And I had a great admiration for the people who did give so much of their time, you know, not only in the times when the pressure was off, but who, when the pressure was absolutely on, could still find it in their hearts to come in and do rehearsals and actually perform with the barest of materials, and basically built around their own talent. Magnificent stuff!*³⁸

"When the pressure was absolutely on"

"When the pressure was absolutely on" was in the railway construction camps, where there was an urgent need for any kind of entertainment to keep the POWs from sinking into despair. Norman Pritchard

^{xvii} As Eleanore Vail, one of my former colleagues at Earlham College and a concert pianist, used to say: "Without me, Beethoven would only be notes on a page."

believed the entertainers' willingness to perform "was over and above the call of duty. Didn't have to do it. Did it because they honestly wanted to do it."³⁹ But Jimmy Walker, one of these construction camp performers, admitted to motivations that were a bit more complex: "Some entertained on makeshift stages partly for the amusement of their fellows and partly as a prop to their own sanity."⁴⁰

Pritchard acknowledged the importance of this performer-audience reciprocity to their survival: "This two way interest was vital. It helped the chap who was doing it, by giving him an object in life, and it helped the recipient who without some encouragement and hope, could easily slip down that no-return path of boredom, self-pity, complacency and despair to an early and very often unnecessary death."⁴¹

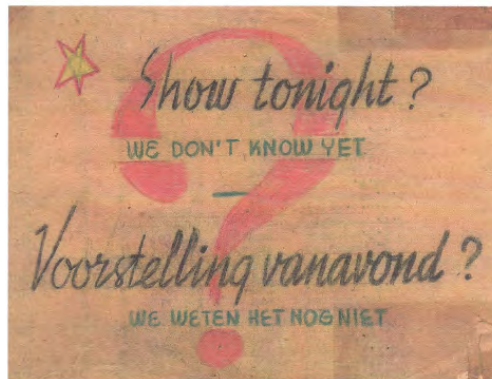


FIGURE 15.7. CAMP ANNOUNCEMENT: CHUNGKAI. HUIB VAN LAAR.
IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

“When the pressure was off”

“When the pressure was off” referred to the hospital and relocation camps. But even there, with more leisure time in which to ruminate, anxieties about the future grew in importance.

Call of duty. For the entertainers who became members of official concert parties, performing *was* their “call of duty,” and the seriousness of this obligation was well understood by musicians like Wally Davis:

[W]ith the band and concerts it was “The Show must go on” regardless of whether any of them had malaria with temperatures well over 100, touch of the trots, or feeling rough otherwise because a very close friend had passed away that day.⁴²

And, according to actor-producer Ted Ingram, by actors:

[T]he actors were splendid. Quite often, they attended a call and rehearsed with tremendous enthusiasm after a hard day's work, a hurried “meal” of rice and jungle stew, and perhaps nursing an attack of malaria. The show

always went on even if most of the actors were sick. They carried on cheerfully and the audience of thousands was never disappointed.⁴³

Heroes. It wasn't just productions of music, theatre, and dance that became vital to the POWs' survival: so did the performers themselves. When G. E. Chippington saw Fred Thompson once again on stage at Kanburi Officers' Camp in 1945, he recalled his first meeting with Thompson back in Changi and the serious facial wound he had received in the battle for Singapore, as well as his previous appearances in shows at Takanun and Chungkai. "I can hardly, even now, believe the transformation," he exclaimed. "Just another demonstration, as so often here, of the triumph of the indomitable human spirit over adversity."⁴⁴

At Nong Pladuk, Rob Brazil found himself the recipient of attention off stage as well as on:

I mean it sounds like [bragging?] but a lot of people said to me, "Kept close to you, Rob, you were always laughing." I don't know but I always laughed at my own jokes . . . that's the basis of it . . . and I was determined I would survive it if I possibly could, you know.

I've got [something] which is the greatest survival kit of all: a will to laugh . . . that makes all the difference, doesn't it?⁴⁵

In a world without heroes,^{xviii} camp entertainers were elevated to the status of "aristocrats," "precious personalities,"⁴⁶ and "stars."⁴⁷ Watching entertainers week after week act out seemingly normal lives and express a variety of emotions on stage not usually shown between men in a POW camp^{xix} gave spectators a vision of "the other civilized world" to which they hoped to return. The entertainers became an embodiment of their own hopes for continuity and liberation. With the exception of the Dutch *cabaretier* Wim Kan, none of these entertainers ever received official recognition after the war for their role in helping fellow POWs survive.

How Entertainment Helped Performers Survive

"There was no formula for survival," wrote Norman Pritchard. "But those of us who were able found great strength in helping our fellows. . . . The Concert Parties helped the men who took part in them as well. It gave us something to look forward to, and it kept our minds active."⁴⁸

Sense of Accomplishment

In a world where they otherwise had no control over their lives, the ability to decide what to produce and then take that choice from its planning stage through to performance gave the POWs involved an enormous sense of control, even if it was only momentary. The future, represented by the date set for opening night, was anticipated, planned for, and once the curtain went up, fulfilled. Audience confirmation of their achievements through laughter and applause kept their spirits going.

^{xviii} An idea voiced by Tom Wade in Chapter 1: "In The Bag."

^{xix} An idea taken from Joe White's "The Prisoner's Voice," found in *Prison Theatre: Perspectives and Practices*, edited by James Thompson (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1998), 186.

Higher Levels of Achievement

As official camp entertainers, their charge was to not disappoint audiences who counted on them for a weekly infusion of morale. Although more than one POW stated that “they were never disappointed” by what they saw, records show this was not actually the case. As should be expected, over the three and half years of imprisonment, there were a number of times when entertainers burnt out or their material became stale from repetition.

What is remarkable, though, is how often “new” talent stepped forward to rekindle audience enthusiasm and how many times the “old” talent was able to rediscover wellsprings of inspiration that allowed them to reach higher levels of achievement. Following his attendance at *Night Must Fall* in June 1944, Patrick MacArthur exclaimed, “These concerts have, in performance, production, stage management, acting, advertisement etc. reached well into the ‘Brandon Thomas’ class^{xx} and made a big difference to the weeks enjoyment.”⁴⁹ Constantly stretching their talents and skills helped entertainers survive.

Camaraderie and Community

Working creatively and cooperatively together in rehearsals or backstage on technical crews fostered camaraderie and community. For magician Fergus Anckorn, the interactions with other actors during rehearsals were a major factor in his survival:

*I remember when we rehearsed and all that sort of thing, you quite forgot that you were in these terrible circumstances. We were learning a script and getting on with it, and doing our little show. Lots of laughs backstage, and that sort of thing . . . and it undoubtedly helped us along as well. In fact, there's lots of performers survived the war when others didn't.*⁵⁰

Besides performing as a female impersonator, Jack Chalker believed that working on a wardrobe staff also contributed to his survival:

Generally exciting times with a great deal of laughter and enthusiasm both on our bamboo bed-spaces or, when allowed, back-stage, where the groups were bigger doing all manner of productive things, including rehearsing, developing ideas, discussing scripts and stage movements.⁵¹

“A sense of identity”

Because no POW records address the question directly, it can only be surmised what effect the music, dancing, or theatre had on those who performed it. In her study of theatrical performances in Jewish concentration camps during the Second World War, Rebecca Rovit asserts that for actors “the solace in ‘being someone else’ aided in retaining one’s humanity.”⁵² For Joe White, a prisoner’s performance was

^{xx} Brandon Thomas was the author of the wildly popular late-nineteenth-century farce *Charley's Aunt* and is not otherwise known as a playwright or producer. So MacArthur's reference is peculiar, unless, as seems likely, he was trying to indicate that the Chungkai productions had reached professional standards.

“part of a much deeper and fundamental necessity: the need to establish, or to re-establish, a sense of identity.”^{xxi53}

Actor and designer Rob Brazil thought performing was “a lark. And the audience was part of it, as much as the players really. . . . They, like everyone, was fighting to survive, and the whole objective was to still be alive when it was all over, you know.”⁵⁴ C. W. Wells also thought it “great fun acting and rehearsing these shows, and it certainly makes the days race by.”⁵⁵ Oliver Thomas^{xxii} agreed “it was much more fun” and added, “we who performed got the most out of it.”⁵⁶ Performing on the bamboo and atap stage at Nong Pladuk felt to Fergus Anckorn like he was home again:

It was just as though we were performing in any theater in England. And the audience . . . you lost sight of the fact that they were sitting on the ground. It was an audience. And you got this rapport.

Well we knew we were doing it for the pleasure of others. We knew that it was a morale job. And Colonel Toosey said, “You know, you chaps are doing the best thing you could ever do. You’re keeping the spirits up.” And we knew we were doing that. But, like all performers, we loved doing it. And it wouldn’t have mattered if there was anyone there or not. So it was very, very normal when we were performing.”⁵⁷

Testimony

Theatre/music/lectures played a vitally important part in our survival, and gave hope to thousands—to see a “show” in the midst of appalling illness, and to be involved as so many were from all walks of life and experience in contributing to it, whether making up a small prop on their bed-space, helping to repair the stage, or stealing paper from the Jap compound for us to write out our scripts—or perform, make music. . . . It was a great business and embraced all POW’s of whatever nation, either in separate or combined performances.⁵⁸

**Jack Chalker
Actor, Costume Designer**

^{xxi} When he wrote this observation, Joe White was a civilian prisoner in England who had participated in several prison theatre productions.
^{xxii} Oliver Thomas was one of the original members of *The Optimists* concert party. He was not sent Up Country.

Rapport: “Much More Than Mere Entertainment”

Anckorn’s observation about the presence of “rapport” during his performance is critical to an understanding of the performing arts’ role in survival. When rapport between a performer and audience members takes place, both experience a feeling of “one-ness” and “alive-ness” beyond the particulars of the moment. Spectators taken out of themselves “live” in the dancer’s movement, the vocalist’s song, and the character’s struggle with adversity. In return, the performer is empowered by the rapt attention and energy coming back from the audience.

This is what Hugh de Wardener came to feel during his performance as the young woman in *Night Must Fall*:

It’s a marvelous play, wonderful play . . . but I had a pretty tough start, because everybody knew me, and there I was appearing as this girl. And there were a lot of titters. I could feel the audience was not exactly with me in the part. . . . And you could tell how taken up the audience was by the number of glowing ends of cigarettes. And when there weren’t any, you had ’em. You had ’em. Absolutely. [Laughs.]

I have never had such sense of power in all my life, as in that play. It was amazing. Because I had started off being laughed at—being known. By the end of play . . . they forget. They [were] totally, totally absorbed, in the play. It was the play; it was a good play.

At the end—the last act—the entrance of this character, she comes in out of breath. So I, before coming in I ran like mad, it was easy to do at the site, you know, on the spot. So I came in, I was breathless. And I remember leaning against the wing, puffing away and looking at the audience. Not a cigarette can be seen, not a single [one]. And I paused a long time before [speaking]. Well, I held it—I held them you see.⁵⁹

Audio



15.2

Exhausted construction camp entertainers like Jimmy Walker felt revitalized when rapport with their audiences was established. As they told their jokes, sang their songs, and played their musical instruments—and audiences warmed to their efforts—their own tiredness fell away, their energy returned, and they, as well as their audiences, were enlivened and given the will to live a bit longer.

For audiences, the experience of rapport prompted metaphysical speculations.



FIGURE 15.8. "DUET." RAY PARKIN. COURTESY OF RAY PARKIN.

Since it was impossible to capture the experience of rapport directly, Ray Parkin used the color, line, and play of light and shadow in his painting of an impromptu performance at Kanyu/151 Kilo to illustrate the moment in which it took place. He later explained what he believed it meant:

In my experience, I felt that these plays, sing-alongs, stump concerts, etc., so spontaneously emerging, even in the darkest days of the Railway and the Jungle, was a measure of the morale still surviving within us and thus being mutually expressed. The Captors could deny us many things but not this deep inner feeling. It was much more than mere entertainment. But you had to "be there" to experience it.⁶⁰

Following a similar experience of rapport during another performance, Parkin used a musical/philosophical term to express its significance: "The harmony of people together: the theatre and make-believe seems to be an important thing to humanity—particularly in primitive states."⁶¹

"Harmony" was also how Ernest Gordon characterized what he felt during a performance at Chungkai: "A unity rare in the theater existed between audience and actors. Each understood the other. This understanding bridged the gaps in the production and glossed over the rough spots in the dialogue."⁶² Later, the "sheer beauty" of the "Mystery of the Lotus" dance revealed to him other aspects of what may come to consciousness in moments of rapport: "by its sheer beauty, the dance reached into our minds and hearts to call forth memories and aspirations we had all but forgotten."⁶³

As the dance concluded, there was a long moment of silence before the spellbound audience responded.^{xxiii}

For performers and audiences alike, the experience of rapport is a liberation from temporal boundaries. G. E. Chippington felt it as "a shaft of light, a breath of freedom."⁶⁴ In these moments, performers feel they are never more alive—and so do audiences.

^{xxiii} See Chapter 6: "Chungkai Showcase," Part One.

Music, Theatre, and Healing

Aboard a transport ship sailing home following liberation, Norman Pritchard was present when several medical doctors who had served on the Thailand-Burma railway spoke about the value that entertainment had played in the lives of the POWs: “Many lives were saved, said the Medical Officers. Not only those who were actually sick, but those who might easily have succumbed if they hadn’t had some reason for living.”⁶⁶

Testimony

I think the poor old POW audiences had their morale vastly lifted by the shows—I know I did—and I feel that the uplift helped many weary men in their fight against sickness and death.⁶⁵

**Lieutenant-Colonel Tom Hamilton
Chief Medical Officer, Tamarkan**

“To stimulate the healing process”

Since the First World War, if not before, music and theatre’s therapeutic effect on wounded soldiers’ mental and emotional condition was well-known.” In *Werkers Aan De Burma-Spoorweg*, H. L. Leffelaar and E. van Witsen note the rationale given for the introduction of entertainment in hospital camps on the Burma side of the railway.

When, during the building of the railway line, many sick POWs were transported to hospital camps in Thanbyuzayat (and other camps) doctors did what they could to elevate the health of these people. However they had insufficient means. To stimulate the healing process under these terrible circumstances, efforts were undertaken by groups existing mainly of amateurs, to look after entertainment.⁵⁸

Besides the entertainment on outdoor stages for the light sick and fit POWs, hut shows for the bed-down on hospital wards became an integral part of each camp’s recuperation program on both sides of the railway.

Numerous examples of the POWs’ physical health being positively affected by music and theatre are found in the historical narrative. Perhaps the most vivid example is David Ffolkes’ belief that he was “brought back to life” by Len Gibson strumming on his guitar in Tarsao/125 Kilo.^{xxiv} Performing’s “two-way” exchange had a positive effect on entertainers’ health as well. “What I noticed during the interviews with people who did a lot of cabaret and entertainment,” remarked Dolf Winkler during his interview with Joop Postma after the war, “was they got out of the camps in a better physical condition than people who did not participate in such things. Your singing took care of you.”⁶⁸

^{xxiv} See Chapter 2: “Jungle Shows”: Thailand.

Final Testimony

In his “Foreword” to Norman Carter’s POW memoir, *G-String Jesters*, Sir Albert Coates, Chief Medical Officer at Nakhon Pathom hospital camp, wrote how the performers and the entertainment they produced were instrumental in the POWs’ survival.

In a sad world, with no relief in sight, only hope and a profound faith in ultimate victory kept men alive. The flesh was weak; malnutrition, overwork, disease impossible to treat because of absence of drugs—in these conditions [Norman] Carter and his merry men performed their parts.

Just as the doctors did what they could with their meagre resources, so the actors, singers, comic artists exercised their talents for the edification of their compatriots. Tired men momentarily rejoiced, sick men laughed, the melancholy were temporarily uplifted.

I think the psychotherapy at a jungle concert was, perhaps, of more value than the ministrations of the men of medicine. At any rate, my medical colleagues and I would regard Norman Carter’s concerts as complementary to the work of the doctors—prophylactic mental hygiene.⁶⁹

Though Coates’ comments refer to the activities of one particular producer and group of entertainers, they are, by implication, applicable to all the performers and the whole musical and theatrical endeavor on the Thailand-Burma railway.

Afterword: “Performing Art”

In her study of theatrical performances in Jewish concentration camps during the Holocaust, Rebecca Rovit questioned the possible role “performing art” has in survival:

One has to wonder whether the act of performing art—whether theatre or music—may be accompanied by a wholeness of self that transcends time and place and creates a buoyancy of mood and spirit. By engaging an audience who needed something meaningful emotionally to hold on to, perhaps they temporarily sustained the will to live.⁷⁰

Rovit's "they" refers to the performers, but its ambiguity allows, as it should, for the inclusion of the audience in the experience of "wholeness," "buoyancy," and "the will to live." Though these prisoners most likely did not survive their monstrous captivity, they were, through the performance of art, momentarily made worthy.

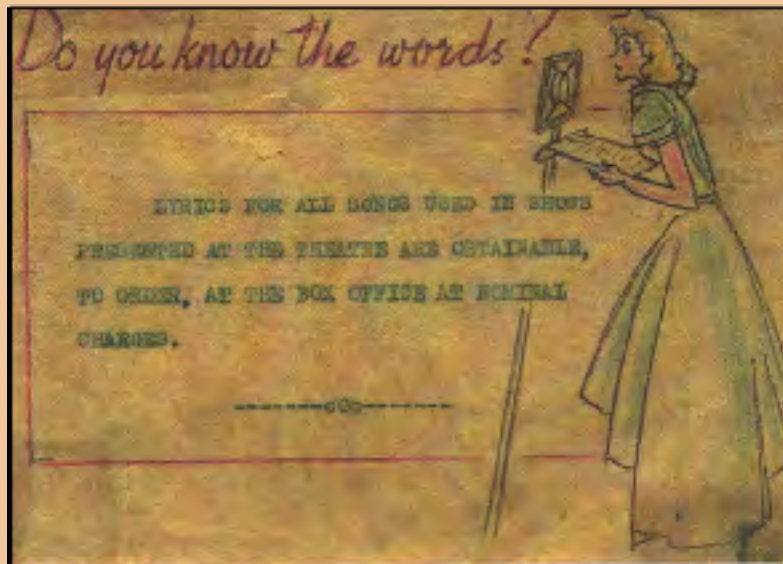
And in that crucial existential moment, something else of immense psychological importance may have been experienced as well—something voiced by playwright Howard Barker after watching a performance by life prisoners: "In the moment of performance they were not in custody."⁷¹

Endnotes

- 1 Chippington, 447.
- 2 Lane, 126–127.
- 3 Pritchard, "Christmas Behind Bamboo," 3.
- 4 Parkin, *Into the Smother*, 79.
- 5 Marsh, 211.
- 6 Anonymous, IWM 95/9/1, 44.
- 7 Jim "Tom" Morris, Interview, 34.
- 8 Chalker, Interview, 40.
- 9 Hall, 114.
- 10 Quote from J. Blattner, *Art of the Holocaust* (London: Orbis, 1982), as found in Michael Balfour's *Theatre and War: Performance in Extremis*, 2.
- 11 Gordon, 75.
- 12 Chippington, 309–310.
- 13 Ransome Smith, "Answers to Questionnaire," n.d.
- 14 Jacobs, 107.
- 15 Griffin, 56.
- 16 John Sharp, "Report on Camps and Entertainments," 2.
- 17 John Sharp, Diary, 1 January 1945.
- 18 Frank Samethini, 90–91.
- 19 Chalker, Interview, 33.
- 20 "Chunkai [*sic*] 'P.O.W. Camp Theatre,'" n.d., n.p.
- 21 Brazil, Interview, 65.
- 22 Durnford, 144.
- 23 McNeilly, "Music in the Prisoner of War Camp Changi Singapore," n.p.
- 24 Gordon, 162–164.
- 25 Peacock, 223–224.
- 26 Dawson, 114.
- 27 Hastain, 157.
- 28 Frank Samethini, 90–91.
- 29 Weller, Letter, 27 September 2002.
- 30 Gee, Diary, 10 March 1944.
- 31 Anckorn, "Recorded Answers to Questions," 6.
- 32 Mackintosh, Diary, 9 March 1944.
- 33 Durnford, 149–150.
- 34 Mackintosh, Diary, 18 March 1944.
- 35 Gordon, 165.
- 36 MacArthur, Diary, 5 April 1944.
- 37 Chippington, 401.
- 38 Jim "Tom" Morris, Interview, 34.

- 39 Pritchard, Interview, 85.
- 40 Walker, *Of Rice and Men*, 50.
- 41 Pritchard, "the undefeated," 3.
- 42 "Chunkai [sic] 'P.O.W. Camp Theatre,'" n.d., n.p.
- 43 Ingram, "Paddy Field Playhouse," 1–2.
- 44 Ingram, "Paddy Field Playhouse," 1–2.
- 45 Brazil, Interview, 44–45, 80.
- 46 Peacock, 224.
- 47 Cosford, 110.
- 48 Pritchard, "Christmas Behind Bamboo," 3.
- 49 MacArthur, Diary, 30 June 1944.
- 50 Anckorn, Interview, 50–51.
- 51 Chalker, Letter, 3 March 2000.
- 52 Rovit, *Theatrical Performance at Auschwitz-Birkenau*, 3.
- 53 White, "The Prisoner's Voice," in Thompson, *Prison Theatre: Perspectives and Practices*, 187.
- 54 Brazil, Interview, 44–45, 80.
- 55 Wells, 233.
- 56 Thomas, Fax letter, 31 March 2001.
- 57 Anckorn, Interview, 50–51.
- 58 *Workers*, 238–239; translation by Sheri Tromp.
- 59 De Wardener, Interview, 39–40.
- 60 Parkin, Letter, 27 August 2003.
- 61 Parkin, *Into the Smother*, 255.
- 62 Gordon, 165.
- 63 Gordon, 166–167.
- 64 Chippington, 309–310.
- 65 Hamilton, Letter to Ray Nixon, 28 January 1946.
- 66 Pritchard, "the undefeated," 3.
- 67 *Workers*, 238–239; translation by Sheri Tromp.
- 68 Winkler in Leffelaar, et al, *Workers*, 250; translation by Sheri Tromp.
- 69 Coates, "Foreword" to Norman Carter's *G-String Jesters*, vii.
- 70 Rovit, 9.
- 71 Barker, "On watching a performance by life prisoners," *Arguments for a Theatre*, 65.

The FEPOW Songbook



CAMP ANNOUNCEMENT--CHUNGKAI. HUIB VAN LAAR. IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

Containing the full text of original songs and song-parodies
written and performed by prisoners of war on the
Thailand-Burma Railway, 1942–1945
as excerpted or referred to in
Captive Audience/Captive Performers.

Contents

Leslie "Biggles" Bywaters

- "Fizzer's Flute"
- "Fore"
- "Please Mister Flynn"
- "The History Professors"
- "I'm a Deb"
- "Swinging on a Strap"

Eddie Edwins

- "Prudie—The Pride of the Prairie"
- "If They'd Only Bring London to Chungkai"

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- "She Told Me"
- "Take My Seat"
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- "I Don't Mind"

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- "Visit to Burma in 1950"
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- "Everything Points to It"

Ted Weller

- "The Ballad of the Three Little Fishies"

Ron Wells

- "Church Bells in the Morning"

SONGS BY LESLIE “BIGGLES” BYWATERS

FIZZER'S FLUTE

(Music: Norman Smith)

Behold in me a member of the Oswaldtwisle band,
 When you hear my music you will think it simply grand.
 I told my wife that playing second fiddle was the cause
 Of much of our unhappiness, she answered without pause,
 You're lucky to be in the band at all with an instrument like yours.
 (Flute)

I saw a nice young lady standing in a crowded bus . . .
 I winked and pointed to my lap, she sat down with a fuss . . .
 I was going out to play all dressed up in my bandsman's suit,
 Her girlfriend asked her who I was, she answered "Ain't he cute?
 I think that he's a bandsman 'cause I'm sitting on his flute.

Once I bought a frock coat with a pocket in the tail . . .
 I wore it at a dance one night, the thought turns me quite pale . . .
 While searching for my handkerchief somehow my hand did pass
 Right down a lady's evening frock, she was a buxom lass.
 Never in the whole of my life have I felt such a perfect ass . . .

Once when playing contact bridge, it is my favourite sport . . .
 I went into the bathroom, as I'd just been taken short . . .
 While I was out my partner said "It really beats the band
 The way he bids and play his lead cards, I seldom understand,
 But at last I know exactly what he's holding in his hand . . ."

When I get home at last on England's happy shore . . .
 I think that I shall never visit Thailand any more . . .
 I'll go into some posh hotel and order something nice
 And wash it down with good old ale, no matter what the price,
 And I'll tell them what to do with it, if they serve it up with rice.

—Changi, Singapore, 1942

FORE

(Music: Norman Smith)

We're two Aphrodites the pride of our age,
 The new generation now holding the stage.
 We don't go for lipstick or facial décor,
 We're bung full of muscle, we're frightfully outdoor.
 So it's Fore, Fore, the game we adore,
 We're first on the tee and you can't ask for more.
 I'm Jesse of Scotland, I worship the pros,
 St. Andrews, St. Pancras, King's Cross and God knows,
 And I'm little Beryl the sweet English rose,
 Two lady champs in the raw—Fore,
 Two lady champs in the raw.

The fashions don't scare us, we never read *Vogue*,
 And all that we ask is a good heavy brogue.
 Our tweedy creations are just right for Tats,
 And we finish them off with these damned awful hats.
 So it's Fore, Fore, the game we adore,
 We're decently dressed and you can't ask for more.
 When playing young King, the assistant at Knowle,
 My knickers fell off, it was really too droll,
 He nearly collapsed when I gave him the hole.
 Two lady champs in the raw—Fore,
 Two lady champs in the raw.

Mere men never scare us—we're proud of our sex,
 We're both rather Freudian, rather complex.
 I dabble in spaniels when not on the green
 And I share a flat with a girl from Rodean.
 So it's Fore, Fore, the game we adore,
 We're both got our girlfriends you can't ask for more.
 When playing a man down at Troon just for fun

I told him my handicap, merely plus one,
 He replied in falsetto "My handicap's none."
 Two lady champs in the raw—Fore,
 Two lady champs in the raw.

Our language is lurid but we're not afraid
 We're two of the Page and Carstairs Brigade.
 I only smoke Woodbines and similar fags,
 Whilst I smoke a pipe and the roughest of shags.
 So it's Fore, Fore, the game we adore,
 We're both done an Eagle, you can't ask for more.
 I'm browned by the weather and rough through the snows,
 I spit like a yokel and breathe through my nose,
 And wherever I spit sure the grass never grows,
 Two lady champs in the raw—Fore,
 Two lady champs in the raw.

So here's to the Driver, the Nibblilck, the Spoon,
 We're two female tigers from Sandwich and Troon,
 To hell with effeminate creatures who cling
 And what's all this cock about babies and things?
 So it's Fore, Fore, the game we adore,
 We've both won the Open, you can't ask for more.
 So here's to the mater we owe her a lot,
 Thank God it was daughters she rocked in the cot.
 And here's to the pater, he hit the right spot.
 Two lady champs in the raw—Fore,
 Two lady champs in the raw.

—Chungkai, Thailand, 1944

PLEASE MISTER FLYNN

(Music: Norman Smith)

Most girls will come from near or far
 To gaze upon a movie star,

And listen to each thrilling word that's said.
 But I find it most distressing
 And I blush when I'm confessing
 That I've got one here beside me in my bed.
 A mind of a magician
 Must have fixed this queer position
 For I didn't contribute in any way;
 I was dreaming so serenely,
 Neither rudely nor obscenely,
 When I suddenly awoke and there he lay.

So please Mister Flynn, can't you see the plight I'm in
 Conduct yourself in gentlemanly style.
 Attractive masculinity
 Is not my sole divinity,
 I only like to have it, once a while.
 So please Mister Flynn, you can stop that silly grin,
 Perhaps I'm not enamoured by your touch.
 There're girls in this locality
 With greater personality,
 So please Mister Flynn, on my knees Mister Flynn,
 I don't want to, thank you very much.

A true artistic gentleman
 Is far more sentimental than
 A doctor, a surveyor, or a judge.
 An answer in the negative
 Is usually a sedative
 But not to little Flynny, he won't budge.
 I've tried him with my autograph,
 The crossword in the *Telegraph*,
 I've read him modern verse of every kind.
 I've showed him new positions
 In the classified editions,

But he only seems to have a one-track mind.

So please Mister Flynn, you must take on the chin,
I'm of the Old Brigade, not of the Light.
You may be an equestrian,
But I'm a mere pedestrian,
And Destiny isn't riding here tonight.
So please Mister Flynn, can't you see the ice is thin,
You've skated near a fissure once or twice.
Don't think my churlish attitude
Is based on sheer ingratitude,
So please Mister Flynn, on my knees Mister Flynn,
I don't want to, not at any price.

Attractive lady friends of mine
Would think this set-up too divine
And greet my awkward fate with loud applause.
They'd think me "too satirical"
Say "Darling it's a miracle,
One simply can't believe in Santa Claus."
It seems a playful Deity
Produced a spot of gaiety,
To tempt me in this tantalizing way;
But my natural condition
Had dictated my position
And that's the reason why I cannot play.

So please Mister Flynn, be a sport and pack it in,
As Mr. Baldwin said "My lips are sealed."
I haven't got the calories
For joining all the galleries
Of every little girl you've sold and heeled.
So please Mister Flynn, you must take it on the chin

*Per ardua ad astra*ⁱ not my aim
 You'll ruin my embroidery
 With overflowing Freudery,
 So please Mister Flynn, on my knees Mister Flynn,
 I don't want to, thank you all the same.

—Chungkai, Thailand, 1944

THE HISTORY PROFESSORS

(Music: Norman Smith)

We're here thanks to the courtesy of Oxford University
 To tell you tales of days when knights were bold
 And how a lot of history that's shrouded in mystery
 Did rarely ever happen as is told;
 Seeing is believing is a saying trite but true
 And here's a bit of history that's absolutely new.

This is the truth about Elizabeth and Raleigh,
 The rainy day, the puddle and the coat.
 The so-called virgin queen and dear Sir Walter used to sally
 Beyond the royal castle and its moat.
 You'd see them stand both hand in hand, they weren't a trifle shy
 And hear Sir Walter murmur low and Lizzie give a cry,
 Then he'd fling his groundsheet on the ground the same as you or I,
 But that of course is quite another story.

This is the truth about King Charles and pretty Nellie
 The first recorded Drury Lane success.
 And when he sauntered out with her, his legs just turned to jelly
 And orange peel and pips got in his dress.
 Now Charles a merry monarch, thought Miss Gwynn was rather cute,
 And if she lived on oranges she'd soon be destitute,
 So he cried "Let not poor Nellie starve" and slipped her passion fruit,
 But that of course is quite another story.

ⁱ "Through hardship to the stars."

This is the truth about Victoria our greatest,
 Of course she didn't say "We're not amused."
 And we would like to add our information is the latest,
 We found it in a diary that she used.
 Victoria and her Cabinet had dined a bit too well,
 Disraeli read an ode about an eskimo called Nell,
 And dear old Queen Victoria slapped her thigh and laughed like hell,
 But that of course is quite another story.

—Kanburi Officers' Camp,
 Thailand, 1945

I'M A DEB

(Music: Norman Smith)

Exactly nineteen years ago, my mother Lady Littlego
 Was married at St. George's in the Square.
 Which really wasn't much too soon, 'cos later on that afternoon
 My infant wails came wafting through the air.
 And so though only just in time, I've had no social scales to climb
 My name and title's opened every door.
 I've never done a stupid act; I've still got everything intact,
 And here's the day I've just been long[ing] for.

'Cos I'm a Deb,
 Such a pretty, rather witty little Deb.
 I'm quite a bright attraction now each night in Berkeley Square
 There isn't any nightingale, so rub it in your hair.
 What a chance
 For a little spot of really hot romance.
 My boyfriends say I'm delicate as any hothouse plant
 They say that I not only won't, but that in fact I can't.
 But if they'd only read the *Tatler*
 They would see I'm quite a rattler,
 And this year's most attractive Debutante.

When father found a child was due,
 He checked up on a friend or two,
 And entered me for Eaton on the spot.
 But when I reached this earthly plane, he found I'd fooled him
 once again
 And Wycombe Abbey then became my lot.
 My nightly treks from door to door, I soon became a monitor,
 When asked to leave I'd quite enhanced my name.
 A finishing academy was hardly thought the thing for me,
 But I finished off dears, all the same.

Now I'm a Deb.
 Such a trustful rather lustful little Deb.
 They say my coming-out affair will stupefy the town:
 It won't be what is coming out, but what is coming down.
 What a whirl.
 For a highly shrewd and interviewed young girl.
 The *Sketch* insists I'm shy, pure as any maiden aunt,
 The *Daily Mirror* tackles me from quite another slant;
 Whilst the *Sporting and Dramatic*
 Say I'm hot stuff in the attic,
 And this year's most attractive Debutante.

The *Sphere* reports I'm all the rage, the latest thing for screen or stage,
 And so I'm asking Noel for a part.
 There's always left, if all else fails, the Windmill and the Prince of Wales,
 Where one can show the essence of one's art.ⁱⁱ
 And as my figure's neat but thin,
 I might become a mannequin,
 I've heard one very quickly learns the knack,
 And as I'm young and pretty, and I've something in the kitty
 I'll soon be singing songs for Mr. Black.

ⁱⁱ At two London theatres famous for their nude revues.

For I'm a Deb.
 A tired and mascara'd little Deb.
 I'm dressed by Schiaparelli in creations rather rare
 But who the hell undresses me is neither here nor there.
 What a flair
 For appealing and revealing underwear.
 I've got a frightful chaperone, the dragon of an aunt,
 Who's failed to stop the frolics of a charming dilettante;
 For she's read in the *Spectator*
 That I'm not a selling platter,
 But this year's most attractive Debutante.

—Kanburi Officers' Camp,
 Thailand, 1945

SWINGING ON A STRAP

(Music: Norman Smith)

Rush hour. Rush hour.
 Taxi ramming, traffic jamming.
 Window slamming, carriage cramming
 Wary workers shuffle to the tempo of the street.
 Everywhere the rhythm of a million milling feet.
 City slickers, pocket pickers,
 Letter stickers, chorus kickers,
 Peace is very rarely found
 Even when we're underground,
 Still the voice of London rants and roars.
 Escalators, indicators,
 Errand boys and mere spectators:
 Cockney voices crying "Mind the doors."

Swinging on a strap, every morning, every evening, every day,
 Looking at a map whether coming, whether going either way.
 Typist from suburbia adjacent to a Judge,
 Looking so embarrassed at that accidental nudge,

Tightly packed together so that neither one can budge.
 Grasping frantically, unromantically,
 Swaying on a strap as we rumble and we tumble 'neath the town:
 Looking for a lap if we're suddenly invited to sit down.
 Smiling at a pretty girl and frowning at the plain,
 Craning eager necks to glimpse the latest strip of Janeⁱⁱⁱ
 We're swinging on a strap, any morning, any evening, any day.

Rush hour. Crush hour.
 Boot repairers, window starers
News and *Star* and *Standard* bearers
 Break into a stumble at the rumble of a train,
 Rummage in the scrimmage as they storm the doors in vain.
 Bedding airers, heavy swearers,
 Underwear and stocking tearers.
 But whenever West End bound
 Even on the underground,
 Life takes on a lighter, brighter hue.
 Disinfectors, crowd ejectors,
 Even beetle-browed inspectors
 Murmur quite politely "Thank you."

Swinging on a strap, every morning, every evening, every day,
 Longing for a nap just to pass the weary minutes right away.
 Smiling philosophically when kicked upon the shin,
 Feeling our elastic go and praying for a pin:
 Trying hard to battle with the rattle and the din.
 Headache hammering, people yammering.
 Swaying on a strap as we nestle and we wrestle in a whirl
 Looking for a sap who will give his seat to any pretty girl.
 But when evening pleasure bound we're feeling fair to fine,
 When following the red light for the Piccadilly Line

ⁱⁱⁱ *Jane* was a British comic strip created by Norman Pett in 1932. During her various adventures, either by choice or happenstance, the heroine usually shed most of her clothes. The strip was considered an important morale booster for troops during the Second World War, and pinups of *Jane* appeared on tanks and aircraft ["Christabel Leighton-Porter," *Obits*, *The Telegraph*, Sunday, 22 July 2012].

We're swinging on a strap, any morning, any evening, any day.

—Kanburi Officers' Camp,
Thailand, 1945

(Listen to Audio Link FS.1 for a vocal and instrumental rendition of this song.)

Audio



FS.1

SONGS BY EDDIE EDWINS

PRUDIE—THE PRIDE OF THE PRAIRIE

(Music: Eddie Edwins)

Verse:

There are many flash dames in the city,
And many good gals on the screen.
I've been far & wide, but I've never espied,
A prettier gal than this wild western queen.

Chorus:

Prudie the pride of the prairie
The girl of the Golden West
She's rough and she's tough
And she's really hot stuff
But still she is one of the best.
She mixes at every rodeo
With cowboys all husky and hairy.
When she swings her hips
All the boys crack their whips, for
Prudie, the pride of the prairie.

She barks and she bites
She stands up for her rights
And feathers her own little nest.
She sorts out the cows & the doggies
And corrals 'em down by the dairy.
She looks such a dream
That the cows all give cream, for
Prudie, the pride of the prairie.

She can spit she can chew
Like a big buckaroo
And she wears a bullet-proof vest.
She's got a log hut in the mountains
It's cold, but it's lovely & rainy

When she pulls her “gat”
 All the boys fall down flat, from
 Prudie, the pride of the prairie.

One day she went roamin’
 Down into Wyomin’
 She took on the trip with great zest.
 She met with an old lone star rancher
 Who called her a sweet little fairy.
 She thought he was cute
 But the friendship bore fruit for
 Prudie, the pride of the prairie.

You’ve heard in this song
 How Prudie went wrong
 The time she was put to the test.
 Don’t give yourself up to a stranger
 With he-men you’ve got to be wary.
 If you must make a date
 Remember the fate of,
 Prudie, the pride of the prairie.

—Chungkai, Thailand, 1943

IF THEY’D ONLY BRING LONDON TO CHUNGKAI

(Music: Eddie Edwins)

1.

I’ve got a very fine idea, I’d like to put to you.
 A very, very simple way to make our dreams come true.
 Instead of ev’rybody going home to make a fuss,
 Why not change it round & bring our home out here to us.

Chorus:

If they’d only bring old London out to Chungkai,
 What a fine old bizness it would be.
 If they’d put New Scotland Yard,

Where the soldiers change the guard,
 Across the road the good old Strand we'd see.
 If the River Thames went flowing past the Cookhouse,
 And the Coliseum was in the Smilodrome,^{iv}
 Then we wouldn't be unhappy any longer,
 For we'd just sit down & make ourselves at home.

2.

Altho' it may be difficult to do the thing at first
 It could be done slowly if the worst came to the worst.
 There is just one problem, or so it seems to me,
 Everyone would want the place where they most want to be.

Chorus:

If they'd only bring the West End out to Chungkai,
 What a fine old bizness it would be.
 If they'd bring Cadogan Square
 And just dump it over there,
 Round here old Piccadilly we should see.
 If Regent Street went curving past the guardroom,
 And the Carlton Club was in the Smilodrome,
 Then we wouldn't pine for Mayfair any longer,
 For we'd have a drink & smoke ourselves at home.

If they'd bring the good old East End out to Chungkai,
 What a fine old bizness it would be.
 If they'd bring the Old Kent Road
 Where the woodmen dump their load,
 Then the Elephant & Castle we should see.
 Now if Barking Creek was round the Johnny Horror,^v
 And the Old Dun Cow^{vi} was next the Smilodrome,
 Then we'd take our donahs^{vii} walking round the Churchyard,
 Knock back a pint and make ourselves at home.

—Chungkai, Thailand, 1944

^{iv} This may have been camp slang for their theatre.

^v Either a reference to the latrines or the ulcer ward, where the smell of rotting flesh was overwhelming.

^{vi} A London pub.

^{vii} Circus slang term for "woman" also used in the British music halls.

SONGS BY BOB GALE

SHE TOLD ME

(Music: Bob Gale)

Dedicated to my wife, Fay

Verse:

I've got a girl in Blighty^{viii} who is waiting for me,
 She said that she would wait until the day I was free.
 And every night I'm thinking as I'm lying in bed,
 Of all those funny little things that my girl had said.

Chorus:

Oh she told me the day that I sailed away,
 That she would never go astray, she told me.
 She told me that she would always be true,
 And never do a naughty thing if I promised [too?]
 Then she told me there would be lovely days
 If I'd been the goody goody I had promised to be.

Verse:

I've got a letter from my girl who's waiting at home,
 She said it's time I settled down, it's silly to roam.
 I've written back to say I'll hurry when I can,
 Provided she can prove she's been with no other man.

—Nong Pladuk, Thailand,
 December 1943

TAKE MY SEAT

(Music: Bob Gale)

Verse:

Monday morning feeling has got me.
 I'm so tired of this monotonous ride.
 But what a difference it would make
 If I had a lovely lady by my side.
 We could talk and make arrangements for the evening

^{viii} Slang name for Great Britain from the First World War.

A show and maybe supper for two.
 And so I would go on dreaming,
 Till I'm [lines missing].

Chorus:

Lovely little lady won't you take my seat.
 Guess you're going shopping down in Oxford Street.
 Wish that I could come along with you and buy,
 Any latest fashion that you care to try.

Lovely little lady won't you please sit down.
 Are you from the country do you live in town?
 Bet you've got your mind on someone else to meet,
 'Cos why is it you hesitate to take my seat?

I've been travelling to work
 At the same old time every day.
 But I must confess that never before
 Has such loveliness come my way.

Lovely little lady now must I repeat
 It would give me pleasure if you'd take my seat.
 It's usually the gentlemanly thing to do.
 But secretly I hope to make a date with you

—Nong Pladuk, Thailand,
 December 1943

(Listen to Audio Link FS.2 to hear a vocal and instrumental rendition of this song.)

Audio



FS.2

SIMPLE COUNTRY LIFE

(Music: Bob Gale)

Verse:

I am just a simple country fellow
And I must admit
I've never envied those who dwell in towns
And I've noticed how they always flock into the countryside
Most every time a holiday comes round.
But I'm not so sentimental as to say this isn't fair,
The world was meant for everyone
For all of us to share.

Chorus:

I don't envy city dwellers
Smartly dressed with rolled umbrellas,
Give me rural England
With its simple country life.
Crowding on to smoky buses,
Packed like rabbits in tube rushes,
Give me rural England
With a cottage and a wife.
There we'll live in peace and gladness
Toiling with a willing heart,
Serving dear old Mother Earth
Until the day that we must part.
Oh, I don't envy city dwellers
Think they're high and mighty fellers,
Give me rural England
With its simple country life.

—Nong Pladuk, Thailand,
1943

I DON'T MIND

I don't mind what happens to me
As long as nothing ever happens to you.
I don't mind if someone harms me
As long as no one ever tries to harm you.
The world is so upset it's hard to be a certainty
I made a fortune when you played with love and lost to me.
I don't mind what happens to me,
As long as nothing ever happens to you.

—Nong Pladuk, Thailand,
1944

SONG-PARODIES BY FRANK L. HUSTON

Song-parodies sung by Australian Jack Wilfred Turner “dressed as a female” in the POW camps in Singapore, Burma, Thailand, and French Indo-China. Words by Frank L. Huston, Melbourne. Additional lyrics supplied by Ian Turner from his uncle’s diary.

THE SINGAPORE RETREAT

(Music: “The Man That Comes Around”)

1.

There’s the man that said that Singapore shall not, must not fall,
He pushed us in the scrum and he left us with the ball,
We’ll resist them on the land, repel them everywhere,
But little did we realise, his words were all hot air.

2.

Now on the peninsula the pace was rough and fast,
Lots of us were wondering how long the thing would last.
But we’d be going yet, we’ll have you understand
Though we knew we were finished when we ran out of land.

3.

The Air Force were magnificent, they long[ed] to have a crack,
They all set out one sunny day and both of them came back.
The Navy did their very best to help us in the fray,
But the only thing they didn’t do was take us all away.

4.

And now we’re P.O.W.’s which isn’t very nice
’Cos we’re fed on a diet of watery stew and rice.
[2 lines missing here]

5.

Now there’s the man that comes to our house, he brings around his gun.
He gives a little grunt, and expects us all to run.
He creeps without a sound, in his little sneaker boots,
But things will soon be different, for the dirty little coots.

WE HAD TO GO AND LOSE IT IN MALAYA

(Music: "She Had To Go and Lose It at the Astor")

1.

Now we had to go and lose it in Malaya,
I wouldn't take my father's good advice,
He said, my boy, you shouldn't join the army,
You should think [it over once] or [maybe] even twice.

2.

So I thought of all the places I would go:
To England, Middle East, or maybe France,
But I never thought of going to Malaya,
I never even gave the place a chance.

3.

We questioned all the sailors on the *Queen Mary*,
They told us we were bound for Singapore,
You could have knocked me over with a feather,
When they dumped us in the rubber in Johore.

4.

Now we had to go and lose it in Malaya,
We didn't know exactly whom to blame,
Malaya Command, the AIF, or English,
They dumped us in a tough spot just the same.

5.

Now we had to go and lose it in Malaya,
I bet it nearly killed the dear old dad,
When he learnt that we had all capitulated,
After all it was the only plus we had.

6.

And ever since I've thought of what he told me,
I only wish I'd done just what he said.
If I'd taken his advice,
I would not be eating rice,
For we had to go and lose it in Malaya.

YOU CAN'T WIN A WAR WITHOUT PLANES

(Music: Tex Morrow's "Beautiful Queensland")

1.

I'm one of those ill-fated Aussies,
That backed to fair Singapore Isle,
To take up some fortified possies
To hold up the Nips for a while.

2.

With big guns, machine guns, and rifles,
And that fact so loudly proclaim,
Their value is nought for without air support,
You cannot win a war without planes.

3.

The Imperial Eagles came over,
With nothing to stop them at all,
We did not think we're in clover,
We heard the bombs sing in their fall.

Chorus:

The moral we put in these stories,
We stress when we sing these refrains,
When put to the test, you cannot do your best,
For you can't win a war without planes.

4.

We were hurried and flurried and scurried,
It was not quite safe above ground.
In view of the number we hurried,
We think our idea was quite sound.

5.

So take off your hats to the Air Force,
The Lords of the clean upper air.
We know of their worth, but then what on the earth,
[line missing]

Chorus:

The moral we put in these stories,

We stress when we sing these refrains,
When put to the test, you cannot do your best,
For you can't win a war without planes.

SONGS BY WIM KAN

***SONG OF THE FOOD GRABBERS*^{ix}**

(Music: Kurt Weill's "Mack the Knife")

Yes, a man has ideals
 But he'll dump them overboard
 For at the moment food appears,
 He is ready for mass murder.

Aristocrat or proletariat,
 The difference is minimal.
 First in line is food,
 Good morals are in back.

Mankind has illusions
 About a better world.
 But things always end up in war
 If it concerns his bread.^x

—Tjimahi POW Camp, Java,
 14 June 1942

LETTER TO MY SON ON CHRISTMAS EVE '42

(Music: Margie Morris' "Had jij niet die mooie blauwe ogen")

["Weren't you the one with those beautiful blue eyes?"]

1.

Dear son, I write to you in my thoughts
 This Christmas letter which you will never receive.
 Do you remember that we laughed about the snowman
 That hangs on your Christmas tree tonight?
 Do you recall that you grabbed my hand
 At the sight of the shining tree?
 How I explained to you this feast of peace on earth
 While you listened filled with awe?

^{ix} Unless otherwise noted, all translations are by Sheri Tromp.
^x Trans. by Margie Samethini Bellamy.

Chorus:

I told you about peace on earth
 About goodwill among men . . .
 Without even a declaration of war
 A mighty army crossed the border!
 For you I tried to smooth over
 The hopeless failure of this time.
 The world was in flames, while I was still chattering
 About peace and tolerance.

2.

Dear son, although I am in faraway lands,
 Take care—before you forget—
 Not to wipe your greasy Christmas pastry hands
 On mother's tablecloth!
 And if the turkey is disappointing
 Or your portion seems somewhat small,
 Bear in mind that your daddy
 Would be dying for such a morsel
 And the leftover bones.
 Try not to burn down the Christmas tree.
 Leave the nativity crèche alone.
 Don't touch the angel, my little naughty boy,
 She rubs off red, when you kiss her forehead.

Chorus:

If only I could peek around the corner
 And see the so familiar place.
 The crazy wall of war notwithstanding
 Just to be "daddy" again.
 I would love to tell a Christmas story
 By candlelight—just like that time—
 When I caught the cat who stole half the Christmas goose!
 I wish she would do it again!

3.

Dear son, I wrote in my mind
 This Christmas letter which I will tear up.
 Don't wait up for your father tonight,
 His stories only disappoint!
 And perhaps it is better after all
 That I am not with you, but only in your thoughts . . .
 From me one gets nothing but a bankrupt earth
 And that is not a suitable Christmas present!

Chorus:

Now your daddy with his "peace on earth" and
 His goodie-goodie Christmas story from back then
 Is hopelessly stuck in Mother Earth's muck.
 What can a human being do about this world?
 I hope—my son—that when you have grown up
 And you sing for your son a Christmas song
 About peace, tolerance and reason,
 It does not sound like an "accusation."

—Rangoon prison, Burma,
 20 December 1942

VISIT TO BURMA IN 1950

(Music: Louis Davids' "Zomeravond" ["Summer Night"])

When I am in Burma around 1950
 And know every little store and prison,
 I suggest to my wife: "Hey Ma
 Let's go to Bangkok—by train—
 I bet that will be a fun trip
 And not hard because you just sit
 At a window, and you can see perfectly
 How your husband pulled at the pile driver
 Like a son of a gun."
 And in case she really shows interest,
 Then I take second class—
 No smoking in my train.

I will phone the chef at Thambuyzayat [*sic*]
 Because, of course, I make my train
 Stop there for an hour or so.
 And I show my wife the well, the swimming hole,
 And the fireplace your dear husband used for cooking.
 And after that I have to arrange
 To hook on a dining coach.
 But I sack the cook; that saves us a lot of space.
 I bake a cake—although this is against the rules—
 That I sell to my wife.
 I just hope that she has the grace
 Not to get motion sickness on my train.

“The train is going too fast!”
 My wife comments angrily, turning pale
 “Your track does not seem up to par.”
 I scream over the thunder of the train:
 “It would be a miracle if I did something good in your eyes.”
 She yells: “Shut your big mouth!”
 And before I can see precisely what is happening,
 The whole dining coach topples over.
 But when I angrily inquire
 Where the construction fault lies,
 I recognize the little bridge as my own work.

My wife is in a foul mood: she calls me a jerk.
 She says: “You always do a half-assed job.”
 When I chat with the chef at Retpu^{xi}
 I find out that my railway line
 Goes straight to China.
 I then ask him how was it possible to miss Bangkok?
 “It is a little matter of a mistake” he calmly replies.

^{xi} A work camp up the railway at 30 Kilo in the jungle.

“They worked from two sides—that went very well—
Only they did not meet; too bad.”

My wife said: “Let’s go back to Rembrandt Square^{xii}

You are too unimportant for work on such a line.”

—Thanbyuzayat, Burma,
22 January 1943

THERE WILL BE A NEW SOCIETY

(Music: Louis Davids’ “Wat zeg jemenou van Ome Ko” in G [“What can we say about old Uncle Ko?”])

1.

Friend Frits of Retpu 1, who thought a lot of himself,
Founded the new Society from his *tampatje*^{xiii}
His neighbor on the right participated for a while, but then dropped out
Because he cared more about playing bridge than about a new world.
His neighbor on the left said: “I feel social, so I’ll participate,”
And stole sugar from the pan of the Premier on the sly.
There were some ministers and everything went well:
For half the day the new front lay rotting in its nest.

Chorus:

That will be the new Society,
Without poverty and without injustice
Because everything you can learn here in a small way,
They will try out in the big world.
There in the new Society
They are waiting in queue for bread and labour . . .
He who is smart dies of laughter as he gets bread for the second time
And passes the front of the line with a job in hand.

2.

Promptly at 10 o’clock one will build the Society,
Except yesterday, because the Premier was searching for salt.
(He knew a little source: it was costing him almost a *riks*.^{xiv}
He got half a barrel—his ministers did not get anything.)

^{xii} A central square in Amsterdam.

^{xiii} Indonesian word for sleeping place.

^{xiv} Dutch slang for 2 ½ guilder.

He pushed two skinny guys aside near the pan with *kra*^{xv}
 And was caught in line getting two helpings of *sambal*,^{xvi}
 And going home with his pan like a traitor.
 He called to “a fellow idealist” that there would be a meeting after
 lunch.

Chorus:

That will be the new Society
 Without a trace of egoism.
 There class distinction will be buried—just like here—
 Between the kings, the lords, and the slaves.
 There is that ideal kingdom.
 There we are so comfortably equal.
 But the first one who determines where to obtain the mustard,
 Gets—just like here—the sunniest spot in the kingdom.

3.

Friend Frits still had some *rupis*^{xvii}, and sold these for such a prize
 That could be contributed to his future paradise.
 His artistic talents were very useful,
 He smoked using pages of *Holland's Glory*^{xviii}
 As cigarette paper.
 And furthermore lots of time was saved, because our Premier
 Knew how to avoid doing vegetable chores.
 And while he was lying on this *tampat*^{xix}
 He practiced expanding his politics to both sides.

Chorus:

There will be the new Society.
 There the farmers wait in the queue for food.
 But he who knows better doesn't waste his time there,
 He goes around to the back door to get beefsteak.
 There in the new Society
 The sun shines with justice, warmth and happiness.

^{xv} Unknown Indonesian word.

^{xvi} Indonesian finger food made with hot chili paste.

^{xvii} Indian money.

^{xviii} Famous book by Jan de Hartog.

^{xix} The man was faking being sick.

The biggest loudmouth sits on the best spot.

We are all equal, but he is more equal than you.^{xx}

—Retpu [30 Kilo Camp], Burma,

20 July 1943

NORMAL AND ABNORMAL

(Music: Hans van Heusden and Hans de Leeuwentemmer)

1.

You read in books about home-sickness and longing.

And when you finished you ate a cheese sandwich.

The sentiments expressed struck you as unreal and shallow.

You hopped on your bike still laughing, but swore up and down,

When you waited for one minute at a traffic light.

We have now waited for one and a half year.

And it is the mundane things that sing a song of home-sickness.

Chorus:

I would love to wait again for a traffic light in The Hague

As an ordinary biker going about his business,

Or try my patience in the post office queue,

Waiting nicely for a stamp of five cents.

I generally did not appreciate enough the queue of the Volks Zeebad^{xxi}

That took an hour (at its best)

That kind of waiting is a pleasure, a kind of cheap break

For him who learned to wait on roll call.

2.

Oh, it's often the simple things, things that you never paid attention to in
the past,

That now sing the song of longing: the desire to see the table setting in
your china cabinet.

I crave the use of the telephone again, it's okay to dial a wrong number,

To try out my lawn chair in the back yard and get water simply out of the
tap,

To walk into a store and buy bread.

^{xx} Additional translation by Margie Samethini Bellamy.

^{xxi} Public bathing place.

Chorus:

I would love to buy a hat again in the The Hague
 On sale, always a battlefield,
 Or walk into the Bijenkorf^{xxii}
 For a pair of pants or a shirt
 And lose the coupon before the cash register.
 Wonderful as they send you from there to eternity
 And the sales lady laughs about your stupid mistakes.
 Buying clothes becomes fun, a kind of unknown break
 For who receives clothes at one hundred and eight?^{xxiii}

3.

And when you see all these things clearly before your eyes,
 You often get the feeling of: I'll never be there again.
 This abnormal life seems the normal life;
 The past becomes a kind of fairy-tale.
 It seems more normal to sleep by the railway tracks than
 Cuddled up in Mitropa's sleeping-car;
 To make dinner of rat livers is more real than: "Butcher, an ounce of
 ground beef!"
 Because of this necessity one often forgets the temporariness.

Chorus:

But one of these days when you are eating at Heck's^{xxiv}
 Till a raw scream signals panic.
 After you've inquired about it, you know the reason:
 A huge rat walked straight through the public dining room.
 After hearing this news, you stare at your veal liver . . .
 Nauseated, you suddenly remember the rat from the past
 And you cannot explain anymore how for two years
 You did the abnormal and called it normal.^{xxv}

—Payatouzu [Payathanau] (Camp 108), Burma,
 26 October 1943

^{xxii} Huge department store in Amsterdam.

^{xxiii} At his present camp—108 Kilo.

^{xxiv} A well-known Dutch restaurant.

^{xxv} Additional trans. by Margie Samethini Bellamy.

EVERYTHING POINTS TO IT

(Music: Hans Maas' "Thuis" ["Home"])

1.

Why are there so many beatings lately
On the workers?
Why is the mood so full of stress?
Why does one see the trains so packed
With cannons and stuff?
Why does the guard carry a rifle?
Really, it's nearly finished.
Believe me, things are going wrong for them.
That's why they act so irritated. It is clear to see.
Read it in the newspaper. The war will end
In a few weeks. Everything points to it.

2.

Why are there no more beatings lately
Of the workers?
Why does one never hear an airplane anymore?
Why does one never see armaments anymore
On all the trains that arrive at 108?
Really, everything points to it.
Really, it's nearly over.
Just look, the guard does not carry a gun,
He is practicing for a peaceful mood.
It is clear indeed that his country will suddenly announce:
"The war is over." Everything points to it.

3.

Why do we walk in rags, without shoes
On wooden shoes?
Why is no food coming our way?
Because it is not worth it
As peace is nearly declared.
Since long things were going wrong for them
Really, everything points to it.

Really, it's nearly over.
 You should read the newspaper
 They admit it, in a long article:
 The end is near. Not exactly,
 But you need to read between the lines.
 You can feel their noose tightening.
 Everything points to it.

4.

Why all those new clothes? Why all the supplies of cows, sugar, and fish?
 It can only mean that they feel less sure and that peace will be soon—
 Really, it's nearly over. Read the newspaper, it confessed this by not
 appearing—
 They are standing in their shirts. Everything points to it.

5.

Masters, in [your] conclusions you claim all sorts of pertinent nonsense
 With an important air. I notice that the time affects your talk.
 Your second childhood is not far off.
 Really, everything points to it.
 Really, you should put a stop to it as quickly as possible.
 Slowly but for certain you are growing senile: all those conclusions are
 infantile.
 See how slowly you decay from an intelligent man into a chicken without
 a head.^{xxvi}

—Payatouzu [Payathanau] (Camp 108), Burma,
 November 1943

SONG BY TED WELLER^{xxvii}

THE BALLAD OF THE THREE LITTLE FISHIES

Song (1) ALL.

Down in the meadow in their little bittie pool
Swam three little fishies and their Mummy Fishy too,
“Swim” said the Mummy fishie “Swim if you can.”
And they swam and they swam all over the dam.

BOOP HOOP DIDUM DATAM WHATHAM CHOO^{xxviii}

“ ” “ ” “ ”
“ ” “ ” “ ”

AND THEY SWAM AND THEY SWAM ALL OVER THE DAM.

Song (2) (“Humoresque”)

Just imagine Mammy Fishie
With her children’s tails a-swishie
Swimming so serenely o’er the dam—wham wham
Can’t you see our eager faces
As we view the open spaces
From behind the finzies of our Mam?

Song (3) (“The Bells of St. Mary’s”)

The three little fishes against Mama’s wishes
Decided to swim out and explore the blue
And filled with emotion they made for the ocean
Oh Boop Hoop Didum Datam Whatam Choo Choo Choo.

Song (4) (“Il Bacio”)

“Stop, stop!” said their Mam-Mam
As she watched them agitatedly
“Stop, stop!” said their Mam-Man
“Oh don’t swim out to sea.”

Song (5) (“Santa Lucia”)

For she’d heard dreadful tales

^{xxvii} Who actually composed the lyrics for this ballad-opera is unknown. It is likely they were composed collectively by the singers, one of whom was Ted Weller.

^{xxviii} Vocal jazz scat singing.

Of horrid hungry whales
 Lurking so furtively
 Out in the open sea,
 Waiting for little fishies
 To make them tasty dishies
 Boop Hoop Didum Datam Whatam Choo
 Boop Datum Whatam.

Song (6) (“Colonel Bogey”)

But we swam and we swam and we swam,
 And we swam and we swam and we swam,
 Disregarding the word of our Mam-Mam,
 We swam and we swam-am.

Song (7) (“Floral Dance”)

Round the corner of a rock
 Was a whale with a face
 Like a town hall clock
 Picking his teeth and cleaning his scales
 With a 12-inch gun from the Prince of “Whales”^{xxix}
 Getting set for a fishie feast
 Oh this whale was a hungry beast.
 Quick as lightning they turned and flew
 Boop Hoop Didum Datam Whatham Choo.

Song (8) (“John Peel”)

Now the whale gave a cheer
 As he slammed into gear
 He tore down the straight
 At a hell of a rate
 And the three little trout
 They were going flat out
 They were eager to get to their Mamma.

Song (9) (“Ha—Ha”)

“Goodbye for ever

^{xxix} A pun on *Prince of Wales*—the battleship sunk by the Japanese on 10 December in the South China Sea. Survivors of this disaster may well have been sitting in the audience.

You'll never never
 See us again.
 Goodbye, Goodbye."

Song (10) ("Delia")

"Fishies, oh fishies, how naughty you are,
 I gave you fair warning don't swim out so far.
 I had some froggies and wormzies for tea
 Now you'll go to bed hungry, so hungry, so hungry."

Song (11) ("Persian Market")

"Mama dear, we're penitent,
 And our pride is sorely bent.
 Please forgive us Mam we're sorry,
 Didum Datam Whatham Choo."

Song (12) [no tune indicated]

"I will forgive you three
 And let you have your tea,
 And all those wormzies too
 Will be for you.
 Promise you'll never stray
 Out in the open bay,
 Stay—in your itty bittie pool.
 Didum Datam Whatham Choo."

Song (13) ("Mother McCree")

"Sure we love the dear silver that shines in your scales,
 And never no more will we show you our tails
 And happy we'll stay in our ittie bitty pool.
 Oh, didum datam, whatham,
 God bless you Choo choo."

Song (14)

That was the story of the fishies in the dam
 They swam out to sea and they got in a jam.
 Now they are happy in their pretty little home,
 And they never ever want to roam.

BOOP HOOP DIDUM DATAM WHATHAM CHOO

“ ” “ ” “ ”

“ ” “ ” “ ”

THE WHOLE FISHIE FAMILY IN THEIR ITTY BITTY POOL.

—Aungganaung, Burma,

1943

SONG BY RON WELLS

CHURCH BELLS IN THE MORNING

(Music: Han Samethini)

“ . . . and as we were sitting there having our *yasume*, we heard the ringing of silver bells, coming from the tiny church . . . and everybody became silent.” —from Han Samethini’s diary

I hear bells with the morning light.
Ringing through the air so quiet
Do they say very soon—have faith—
Loved ones pray for you always.

There are church bells in the morning,
Reminding me of the old folks at home.
And my heart is aching for that morning,
When I’m returning across the foam.

Then the church bells of my home-town,
And the choir as they sing,
Will remind me of church bells in the morning,
And the faith they brought to me.

—Tamuang, Thailand,
5 June 1945

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Between our initial contact in July 2000 and his passing in August 2009, Australian FEPOW Laurie Allison and I maintained a lively correspondence during which he answered enumerable questions about the Thailand-Burma railway, his experience as a POW, and the British and Australian military (he had enlisted in the British army’s Royal Corps of Signals before the war). Though not a performer himself, Laurie had a keen interest in ensuring that the entertainers and entertainment on the railway be acknowledged as having played a significant role in the POWs’ survival. He and his wife Heather and their family were gracious hosts when my wife and I traveled to Australia in the spring of 2002 to conduct research.

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FEPOW Contributors

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While every effort has been made to contact copyright holders, the publishers will be glad to rectify any errors or omissions brought to their attention.

SOURCES

Backstory:

[To hear the author explain how *Captive Audiences / Captive Performers* came into being, watch the [Video Link](#).]



Abbreviations:

- AWM Australian War Memorial, Canberra, ACT, Australia
 IWM Imperial War Museum, London, England
 NIOD Netherlands Institute for War, Holocaust, and Genocide Studies

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