

THE WINDMILL THEATRE IN WARTIME.

A great Windmill stood on the sight from the latter part of King Charles II reign until the end of the seventeenth century, so when the theatre was built it took the name 'The Windmill'

It began life as the first cinema in the 'Little West End', but with the coming of 'The Talkies' with productions becoming bigger and more costly, Larger theatres were built and The Windmill was reduced to showing foreign films or the old classics.

A Mrs. Laura Henderson, (quite a character by all accounts) bought the property and with partners Bernard Isaacs and J.F. Watt Phillips engaged the architect Howard Jones to remodel the outside as a traditional windmill and the inside as a one tier miniature theatre with a seating capacity of 322 and so the Windmill Theatre was born.

The Windmill opened on June 22nd; 1931 with a play by Michael Barrington 'The Inquest' with Mary Glynn, Hilda Trevelyn and Herbert Lomas in the cast.. It was not a great success, so after a few more mediocre plays it was decided to revert back to films.

In December 1931 Mrs. Henderson. Was so distressed at the disastrous effect that the films were having on 'Live Theatre' she was determined to try out a new form for her theatre. She gave her General Manager, Vivian Van Damm carte blanche to engage young artists to try out a policy of 'non-stop variety' which was working well in Paris.

In February 1932, London was introduced to an entirely new concept of non-stop variety programmes, running from 2.30pm to 11pm. With a change of programmes every week or so.

During those early years the Windmill lost over £20,000 but Mrs Henderson was one determined lady and Van Damm and his daughter Sheila were very good judges of talent. And very soon Londoners became aware of the new and exciting concept of variety The Windmill's luck had changed.

Van Damm based his ideas on the famous or infamous Moulin Rouge in Paris (another Mill) but unfortunately British laws regarding nudity on the stage were rather different from those in France and the Lord Chamberlain and his Watch Committees all over Britain were very strict to enforce the law, and the law was..you could have an artistic nude on the stage, but he or she could not move.

Van Damm structured his programmes so that the nude tableaux and dancers were interspersed with singers and comics and it was in this field the 'The Windmill' nursed many famous comic actors.

Van Damm held auditions every Wednesday and anyone could pop in and as they used to say 'be audished' Amongst those to whom Van Damm gave an audition were Tony Hancock, Bruce Forcyth, Alfred Marks, Harry Se combe, Terry Scott Jimmy Edwards Eric barker, Morcombe and Wise Michael Bentine and Peter Sellers. They were all given a chance of a 'slot in a show' .

It was a tough life with three shows a day and night and even for those times the pay was poor. Tony Hancock once worked it out that he was paid the equivalent of 41p per show in today's money.

The girls were chosen for their beauty for the nudes and their beauty, talent and personality for the rest. The first girl to stand on the stage in the nude was Helen Taylor. Van Damm sacked Jean Kent, who became a very famous film star 'because she lacked personality' Another odd name on the female list is the Vicar of Stiffkey's daughter...

On September 4th. 1939 war was declared. Overnight every place of entertainment was closed by order of the Government, the theory being the Germans would bomb places with people gathered in. Those of us old enough to remember will recall even the BBC closed down and nothing was heard on any station but news bulletins and The Bells...day in day out ...Bells..bells and more bells We were all almost driven mad, so the BBC relented and hired Sandy MacPhearson to play the Hammond organ all day long with the odd peal of bells for good measure.

After about 19 days the Government decided places could open provided there were air raid shelters near at hand. The Windmill was one of the first to re-open and from that day took the motto 'We never closed'

Those were dark grim days the air raids began and more and more men and women were drafted into the forces munitions the mines Colour left the streets as Khaki, navy blue and airforce blue took over

The Windmill girls added colour zest and gaiety and the boys humour to a depressed city, but the Watch Committee ever keen to keep the morals of the forces pure, were even more determined to stop the nude shows. Every show the cast were aware that the Lord Chamberlain was waiting for one slip up to close them down and all lose their jobs. So no matter what happened the nudes must not move and they never did.

We know many of the young mens names who became famous but we know few of the many very courageous girls who went on the stage day and night even when as someone said 'There were more bombs in the theatre than audience'. The singers dancers and comics could rush for shelter when they heard the bombs, the nudes could not and did not move. Time after time they were covered in plaster from the roof and bits of the sets, but the girls had a motto of their own, 'If it moves, it's rude'

The Windmill played a big part in keeping up the morale in London. The troops loved it and can you blame them.both sexes..tho' perhaps not in equal proportions..enjoyed the shows..Well let's face it, satin,sequins and feathers do have a slight edge over khaki and passion dampers (the forces name for regulation issue of undergarments).

The nudes were usually covered in 'wet white' a water based white paint as they posed in tableaux of Greek sculptures. Other times they were in frames as famous classical paintings

How do I know all this? Because I had two brothers-in-laws and many friends who were regular patrons. One of those was an officer in charge of the gun sight in Hyde Park they were a sitting target for the Germans determined to bomb London into the ground. So to escape to the Windmill sometimes and to forget the horrors outside was very therapeutic. My brother in law had

a penchant for a visiting singer, I think it was Phyllis Dixie and had many programmes autographed by her. He used to send them home to my sister telling her all about the acts.

The Windmill was naughty and risqué, but never low or vulgar. People think life behind stage was immoral. Not so. Miss Sheila was very strict with her girls. The sexes were kept apart and anyone in the wrong place at the wrong time was instantly sacked.

The front row seats of the theatre had to be very firmly fixed to the floor as the rush for the front seats was rough and hectic a band of joiners was on hand to do nothing but screw the seats back.. It is said only one man jumped the footlights but the back-stage crew reached him before he reached the girl, who never moved. The watch committee must have felt very thwarted.

Many people now look back and shake their heads when you mention the Windmill Theatre in war..They deny they ever went or knew anyone who went. What a hypercritical denial of The Brave little theatre that 'Never Closed' but gave fun laughter and colour and a short oblivion from the nightmare of warfare .