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BBC'S ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEW EDWARD BARNES

28 MAY 2010

Q Introduce yourself.

00 00 09 **A** I started as a freelance stage manager working for a most marvellous guy, Michael Mills, now sadly dead, who was a most amazingly exciting person to work for. And I'd just come back off a long tour of doing the same play night after night as a stage manager, and I worked on *Almari* for him, which was a huge thing with millions of scene changes, and it was live. And it was so, I can't tell you how exciting it was, the whole thing. My first hope for television was I might find someone to pay my salary every week, which, in the theatre, you never can for very long. But, in actual fact, after one sniff I didn't ever want to go back to the theatre again; actually I did afterwards because I was freelance at the

00 01 15 time. But, I then got a job as one of the first batch of assistant floor managers, which they then decided to put on the staff, it was the complete reversal of the policy now, which is, if you've got staff, can you not avail him to go freelance. But then the BBC was very, sort of, hierarchically run at the time and having these maverick freelancers working for men like Michael Mills

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who would say, ‘If you haven’t got all the props here by 9 o’clock, don’t ever expect to work for me again’, you know. He was inspiring from that point of view. So you made sure you got them there, and you didn’t care who you killed in the process. Which, actually, they thought they’d better get these guys under control, so they invented the assistant floor manager job. I did that for two years and then I became a floor manager.

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Q Was it a TV paradise to work here?

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A Well it was really, because none of the other places had been made for television; I mean Gainsborough Studios were old film studios, and they’d sort of revamped a bit of telly into them, but they were really old film studios, and, again, there were only four studios anyway. This place had these huge studios, and it was actually purpose-built for television, with the workshops across the road, the paint frames across the road, the design block, everybody was there and on-song, and it was a kind of famine we’d had before, and everyone was waiting for this. And I remember walking in, they opened the canteen, the canteen was the first block, there was a scene block and then the canteen block, and they used the canteen for rehearsals whilst

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it was being made into a canteen, as it were, outside

00 03 37 rehearsals this was. We roamed this ring road with an old friend of mine who also was from a theatrical background, and we looked into this massive great hole that they were digging, and he said, 'When you think of all the dry up managements we've worked for in the past, it gives you some confidence that somebody's got the money to dig a hole that deep'.

Q Were you aware of the potential of Television Studios?

00 04 16 **A** We all were. I was on *Blue Peter*, I worked with Biddy on *Blue Peter* for a lot of the time, and we were always trying to do something grander and more exciting, and the fact that you could actually drive into these studios, you couldn't do that in work, you could drive out of F dock into G and that was it in Lime Grove, you couldn't, all the studios were upstairs. It's a small thing, but it made a lot of difference to the kind of things we could have there.

Q What was the working atmosphere like?

A Well I think they weren't much different from Lime Grove, from the point of view of working on the floor. It was just a great deal easier, and a great deal better,

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and the studios were so incredibly hot, working in the

00 05 30 studios in Lime Grove, you wouldn't believe, there wasn't air conditioning. And we had those great huge arc lights that belted out heat. And these beautiful air conditioned studios were a joy to work in in the summer. Life was a great deal more comfortable, working here.

Q How did the *Blue Peter* garden come about?

00 06 11 **A** The *Blue Peter* garden came about largely through *Magpie* because I used to occasionally look at *Magpie* and see what they were doing; Susan Stranks had a garden at the, they were at Teddington Lock, so they had land there, and I thought, 'That sounds attractive'. So I nicked the idea, but I needed to find a place to put it, and I found this little bit of land tucked away behind the canteen and I sort of claimed it, put the *Blue Peter* flag there, and claimed it for *Blue Peter*. And in fact, it worked. And it was a marvellous thing because we could do, we started off, Percy Thrower was the *Blue Peter* gardener, and he designed the sunken garden, which is still there to this day. And we did all the gardening things, and Percy was marvellous, he was a grandfather figure, everybody says you must have

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youth in children's programmes, but the grandfather

00 07 16 figure was quite important to a child, he was then in his late 50's or 60's. We did all the gardening things, which were interesting, but apart from that it was, particularly in the winter, you could go outside, and in the short shooting days, as far as films were concerned, because it was dark by 4 o'clock, you could do an item outside, which gave the programme a different sort of feel really. It broke the studio walls down, as it were. We were able, also, because of the restrictions of what you can't do in the studio, we were on the edge, the cutting edge of going as far as we could with everything in the studio, but when they said there's just no way you can do that in the studio because it was fire, or it was water or something, we could do it in the garden.

00 08 17 And it extended the range of the programme quite significantly.

Q Explain the garden vandalism story.

A The *Blue Peter* garden was vandalised, and we arrived one morning and just discovered that this had happened. And we decided, like we always do, really, on *Blue Peter*, there's no point in pretending this hasn't happened, this is a story, we'll tell them what

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happened, and we did. And the country was appalled, it

00 09 42 was quite a salutary item really looking back on it, that people were horrified to see that something that was created for people's pleasure should be ruined by mindless, ridiculous people who just wanted to destroy something, and I thought it worked really well.

Q Can you explain the extent of the damage?

A The whole thing was trashed, they'd taken the urns, the plant pots that had trees in them, ripped the trees out, chucked them into the fishpond. They'd chucked the seat into the fishpond, they'd uprooted all the trees and all the plants; it was a complete horrible mess really.

Q What was the impact on the production team?

00 10 51 **A** We were upset and quite angry about it, yes we were, I don't think it, I mean, it was part of what we did and we were furious. But on the other hand, I say, we made something out of it for the programme, but it was a very unpleasant thing to happen.

Q What about the paw prints, can you explain the whole story?

A Yes, the Grauman's Chinese Theatre in New York is a place where the stars put their handprints and their

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footprints and Biddy thought it would be a great idea to

00 11 49 have our own Grauman's Chinese Theatre. So the presenters put their footprints and handprints, and of course the four-legged presenters put their paw prints and they're still there to this day.

Q Tell us about the Saturday morning shows you worked on, were they like that because of the size of the studios?

A *Swap Shop* began with, I was Deputy Head of Children's Programmes at the time, and Monica Sims was away on grace leave so I went for the routine meeting with the Controller of BBC1, the first time I'd done that, and he just said, 'Children's programmes are doing alright in the week, but they're doing very badly

00 13 06 on Saturday morning'. Which immediately infuriated me, I said, 'That's on account of the fact that you don't give us any money for Saturday morning'; there was a zero budget, we just did repeats. And obviously if there's no money you're not going to get a programme and he said, 'You find the programme and I'll find the money'. And so I remembered that Rosemarie Gill, who was one of the triumvirate on *Blue Peter*, still working on *Blue Peter*, had had an idea of having a programme

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where children could swap things, because children

00 13 49 quite like swapping. And it hadn't actually, I don't know how far it had got in her mind, but it never made it, people were interested in it, but they didn't have the money. But it was based also on the *Blue Peter* letters and on children writing in, and their ideas can be used as a sort of swapping thing. I had also recently done a programme with a guy called Noel Edmonds, who was a *Top of the Pops* fail at the time, but a terrific star of radio. And he came and did a programme for us called *Zed Shed* which was about children's problems, it was an agony aunt programme, and he chaired that. And he was terrific, I thought. He was such a natural easy guy

00 14 43 who could talk without a script, without anything. So I thought he'd be just the guy to do this. I was also doing *John Craven's Newsround* at the time, I'd started the news programme, and John Craven was a great guy so we'd have a news element in it. And I was quite taken with Delia Smith who'd I'd seen on *Presentation*. And I just said to Rosemary, 'These are the ingredients that I'd like to see', and she made a three hour programme with no rehearsal out of these elements. It also included the cartoons; there were two cartoons that

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would have played anyway on a Saturday morning.

00 15 29 And it was a breakthrough really in broadcasting; nobody had ever done unrehearsed proper programmes before. They'd done *Grandstand,* with one guy talking and introducing the next OB, but to actually sustain three hours entertainment without any rehearsal was unheard of. And the Engineering division were really upset about this because they said, 'We don't know where anybody's going to be, it's going to be unlit, the BBC has a worldwide reputation for the best sound and the best vision in television and you're just going to rubbish it'. So we gradually rubbished it, and we gradually spread out doing things rather than Noel just introducing films and introducing a pop group on video. And he ended up doing things like walking

00 16 34 out of the studio with a handheld camera into the studio next door to interview somebody who was going to make a children's programme. And we did all kinds of absolutely marvellous things, but it was very much part of this building really.

Q You used Television Centre any way you wanted.

A Absolutely, oh yes, he went out, he'd go out into the wardrobe department and into the scene dock, all kinds

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00 17 08

of places, because children were always interested in television, the behind the scenes in television. So we did all kinds of things like that.

Q Tell us about the tap dance on *Record Breakers*.

A It was *All Star Record Breakers* that the tap dance was in, *Record Breakers* was a programme that I'd commissioned with the McWhirter twins, and wonderful Roy Castle who really made, who was tremendous, and could do, such a wonderfully versatile man who could do everything, he could dance, play the trumpet, tell jokes, he could do the lot. And every Christmas we did a thing called *All Star Record Breakers* which was really like in the early days they used to have the BBC pantomime with all the stars from all over the place. So we had the *All Star Record Breakers* with all the stars of children's programmes, built loosely on a record breaking theme. But it was really a big entertainment

00 18 19

programme run by Alan Russell. And he had this marvellous notion of breaking the world record for the maximum number of tap dancers, and it was 500, so he was going to make it 502. And he tap danced out of the studio with a little girl he interviewed about this, whilst he tap danced out of the studio into the great

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circle, which is the inside circle where the fountain is.

00 19 03 And there were the other 500 dancers, and he'd slung a camera across the middle of the O and had this most wonderful Busby Berkeley shot of 500 dancers breaking a world record, which was tremendous.

Q It must have taken some organisation.

A Oh yeah, well Russell was terribly good at that, and it was terrifically risky, it was recorded but it was enormously risky.

Q Can you start again?

00 19 55 **A** The tap dance sequence was enormously risky on account of the fact that it was done in the open air and it was done, it was recorded on something like the 20th December, and there were troughs of rain coming over the whole time, which would have absolutely ruined the whole thing. But we soldiered on and did it, and it looked marvellous I must say.

Q Tell us about the other Saturday morning shows.

A ITV were doing *Tiswas* before we did *Swap Shop,* but they hadn't done it on such an immense scale of it being a three hour entertainment programme with everything in it. But this then, as you know, the way the BBC works, if a thing is a success then they try and

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replicate that, and that's what Saturday morning is, and

00 21 17 they're doing that to this day really, what they're doing is a variation on the theme of *Swap Shop*. Rosemary had these quirky notions like having the swapping idea, and when she did *Saturday Superstore* it was like playing shop, and that's what really fired children's imagination, it wasn't just here's another pop group, there was something more to it than that.

Q What do you cherish most about working here?

00 21 59 **A** The thing that gave me the most pleasure came out of a coincidence; we'd made a film, a *Blue Peter* special assignment film in Amsterdam, and in it we did the Anne Frank house, directed by a guy called David Brown. And it was a good programme, it was quite a successful programme, and then a year went by and I had a telephone call out of the blue, from a man who said he was Otto Frank's brother in law, Otto Frank being Anne Frank's father, and he had seen this programme and he thought it was the best depiction of the Anne Frank house he'd seen on British television, and he said, 'My brother Otto is coming to London in about six months' time, would there be a chance of him seeing it?' Of course in those days there was no way of

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recording programmes, if you wanted to see a

00 23 12 television programme you had to come to Television Centre and book a studio and show them the film. So I said I would do this, and sure enough he rang up and said, 'Otto has arrived', and we arranged a time. And this guy, most wonderfully, terrifically good looking, tall distinguished guy, in his eighties, looked great, and was absolutely charming. And I showed him the film and he was very pleased with it and said it was extremely well done and so on, quite complimentary about it. And I said, 'Just as a point of interest, where are Anne's diaries, where are they physically?', and he said they were in a bank in Basel. So I said, 'Would there be any chance of you taking them out of the bank in Basel and bringing them to the *Blue Peter* studio so we could show the children of Britain the actual diaries

00 24 11 that Anne used? And he said, 'Oh yes, I would like to do that'. And that was as simple as that really, and Lesley Judd did the most wonderful interview with him. I mean I won't say I was proud of it, it was given to me on a plate really, but it was a wonderful thing to have happened.

Q Tell us about the viewing galleries.

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A When they built these magnificent studios here at Television Centre they also included in them a viewing gallery whereby from the second floor you could look down through a glass, down onto the floor of the studio, and every time I walked past there going to lunch I always looked down, because I've always loved television, it was so exciting working in television, and to look down and see it all happening, just as a glimpse, made you sort of glad to be here, you know.

Q Was it exciting knowing about all the other shows being made at the one time?

A Oh yes, that's certainly true, it was one of the things, that you were walking into the canteen at the Television Centre in those days, and you'd bump into your old friends from the theatre who were in a drama. And in doing *John Craven's Newsround* I knew all the people in news. So it was, I remember David Attenborough, when he left the day job of being in the BBC, he was asked what we would miss the most. And he said, 'My friends at the BBC. It's the finest club in London', and I felt exactly the same as that.

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