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'A History Of North Regional Broadcasting' - KENNETH LAWSON

(Interview I7 - Notes)

Trevor Hill: (Reads out Letter)

' 9th January, 1956.

Dear Sir,

With reference to your recent Interview, we are prepared to offer you the post of Designer here in Manchester at a starting salary of £975 '.

And that letter, signed by Alan G. Smith, the then North Regional Executive, was sent to **Kenneth Lawson**, at the time when **Dickenson Road** - the first premises to be used outside London for BBC Television, were about to be re-opened having now been properly equipped for the job.

What, I wonder, impressed the Head of Television Design, **Richard Levin** and the other members of the board, so that you were the successful candidate?

Ken Lawson (Mentions his previous background and says something of his experience - and what motivated him to apply for the BBC post. Please also mention that you came to see the Head of programmes, **Bryan Cave-Brown-Cave**, and the man who was to be your immediate boss, **Philip Robinson**, who at that time was still responsible for Radio Outside Broadcasts, and had taken on Television as well. A short time after your arrival, **Thurston Holland** became the Television Organiser for the North Region))

Trevor Until you began working for us of course, nearly all our Television programmes were done as O. B.'s with the Mobile Scanners. Can you remember the first studio-based programme you worked on at Dickinson Road ?

Ken (Talks about it - and the physical difficulties of working in such a small area in this converted Wesleyan Chapel, for **Studio A** - and of the even more cramped space for what was grandly called **Studio B**. Please mention the **Inscription** which you noticed the first time you entered the building).

Trevor I don't know if you remember, but within three months of you joining us, you'd designed for me the Set for what was to be the fore-runner of 'Blue Peter'. In May, 1956 we did the very first '**Childrens Television Club**' as an Outside Broadcast from aboard the '**Royal Iris**' steamer on the river Mersey, and then; a great moment for all concerned, you managed to get us into Dickenson Road as from May 20th for this monthly 'live' series.

Ken (to mention that the programmes were introduced by a very young 'beginner' on BBC Television, **Judith Chalmers** - assisted by two people who were at the other end of the 'celebrity scale' - **Wilfred** and **Mabel Pickles**.)

Trevor and Ken to mention the hot Sunday afternoon in July when the man from Blackpool brought some of his 'Rock-making' equipment into the Studio in order that some of the children taking part could put the programme's Initials as lettering into the rock - and how the studio lights made most of it melt; how our Floor Manager, **Cecil Korner** used to take the **Television Club's** dog, **Conker**, out during the programme 'when it needed a bit of grass', and how Cecil always managed to get in shot when he brought 'Conker' back onto the Set again. Cecil even asked the BBC asked for an 'Appearance Fee'!!)

Trevor Another 'Live' Sunday programme we did together from 1957; but for this you only occasionally got a 'Design' credit, - was '**Sooty**'. That went on as a BBC series until 1969. And what about those famous Pigs!

Ken (Mentions the 'Pilot' programme he designed for of '**Pinky and Perky**', broadcast on 20th October, 1957 - and when the BBC decided to go ahead with a series entitled '**Pop Parade**', he brought in a free-lance, **Paul Bernard** to design the Pop Studio which the pigs ran, ably assisted by a young BBC announcer, who made his television debut on the show; name of, - **Roger Moffat**)

Trevor By far the most ambitious of all the 'Pinky and Perky' programmes we did from Dickenson Road, was when they went around the world in an old paddle-steamer, '**The Melodymaster**' assisted by the then 'star' of the BBC '**Z Cars**' series, **John Slater**.

Ken (to talk about his talented young Design Assistant who not only did all the sets for this round-the-world musical journey, but also designed the 'Melodymaster' itself; the large studio water tank on which the boat appeared to sail - and the radio controlled small model of 'The Melodymaster'. He was **Tim Harvey**, winner of three BAFTA and one 'Emmy' award in later years. Ken goes on to say how very fortunate we all were in those early days of Television in the North Region to have a studio staff; - although very small by today's standards, - of people of the calibre of **Bob Dunscombe** as our Scenic Artist, ... **Frank Taylor** in charge of the Scene Hands who, right from the start, Ken got from the Hulme Hippodrome.

How, upon arriving in Manchester, you had no assistant, no secretary, and no scene hands or carpenters. By the time 'Pinky and Perky' came onto the nation's screens, you also had **Eric Cornwall** in charge of 'properties' - and please mention the Chief Carpenter and others by name)

Trevor All their creative talents beautifully lit by **Tommy Mottram**, as I recall. We certainly had a lot of 'drama' with 'Pinky and Perky' being shipwrecked, et cetera, - but let's now turn to another form of Television Drama.

There was a period when you, **Tim Harvey** and were designing an adult televised play production from Dickenson Road at a rate of roughly one a month. Tell me something about that side of design work.

Ken (Does so, mentioning he is still proud of those memorable early days; of working with **Naomi Capon** as a visiting producer for Ionesco's play, '**The Chairs**'; of having to design a Computer which had a personality all of its own for the American play, **Desk Set**, produced by North Region's own Television Drama producer, **Vivian A. Daniels**; ... of doing the play, '**So Many Children**', which starred **Thora Hird**, **Arthur Lowe** - and way down the list of credits, a young actor named **Michael Caine**)

Trevor I notice that '**The Daily Telegraph's**' television critic had little to say about Mr Caine's performance - but he did comment as follows:-

Trevor (continued)

'Kenneth Lawson's setting with its floral wallpaper, streaky paintwork, table lamp slightly out of perpendicular, the brass bedstead with a knob missing, and the reproductions on the wall, were just as right as Miss Hird's dyed-in-the-wool Lancashire landlady'..!

Television Designers don't get quite that amount of attention these days, I venture to say.

You designed , for **George Foa**, the London based director, sets for '**The Two Mrs Carols**' and, '**The Old Road** , which were also done from Dickenson road - and am I right in thinking a young **Albert Finney** appeared in a play called, '**June Evening**', along with **Violet Carson**. It was a bit like a forerunner of 'Coronation Street'. That property, incidentally, was offered to and turned down by our very own **Barney Colehan**.

Ken (Replies to this)

Trevor But lets turn to some of the North's Light Entertainment successes on national tv - and here, Barney's name comes to the fore. You did quite a lot of the design work on '**The Ken Dodd Shows**' as Outside broadcasts from Northern Theatres, besides a television series which still, I believe, holds a world record, having run for some 30 years - '**The Good Old Days**'.

Ken (To explain that for this series, he designed Backcloths to suit almost every Act that might appear on the show - and that these were done in thin water paints on unprimed canvas in order that they could be folded and stored until required again.)

Trevor Yet your own name never appeared in the Credits.

Ken (Explains that this was at his own request; ... he wanted the viewer to believe that what was seen was all of the past)

Trevor Occasionally you went down to London to Design for them.

Ken (Mentions the first production of '**Home James**' which starred **Jimmy James**, the father of our BBC Manchester colleague in Light Entertainment, **James Casey**.)

Trevor Turning back to the 1950's, we will both remember Sunday afternoons at Dickenson Road. I'd be trying to rehearse with Harry Corbett and 'Sooty' in the lavatory-sized Studio B, whilst in Studio A, and using all the cameras available, would be the **Northern Symphony Orchestra** doing their 'live' series of Concerts. Design problems apart, didn't our colleagues experience Acoustic problems with the orchestra ?

Ken (Explains that right from the start, '**Concert Hour**', as it was called, sounded as dead as a Dodo in Studio A - because of all the Acoustic Quilting which had been applied to the old stone walls of the Chapel, and how you came up with the idea of suspending rigid fibreglass panels - especially over the string section, and other hard surfaces behind **Sydney Coulston**, the principal horn and other brass players)

Trevor A lot of exciting experimental work went on in those early days. (Recalls the first electronic **Inlay and Overlay** invented by that brilliant BBC North Regional engineer, **Ron Pearn** - and of Lime Grove's attitude to the use of this 'bread-board' piece of equipment). When talking recently with Barney Colehan, he told me that in the same day, he did 'Pilot' programmes of '**Make Way For Music**', which was accepted, and of another studio experiment he tried out with a working title of '**The Teen and Twenty Club**'. The latter, of course, made Television history when it was accepted some months later under the title of, '**Top Of The Pops**'. You designed for that.

Ken (Replies - it was done 'Live' with **Johnny Stewart** directing. Please also mention here two other series for which you did the original Design, Ken, and both for BBC 2 - '**Call My Bluff**', and '**Face The Music**')

Trevor In those formative years as the very first Television Designer in North region, and then as its Senior Designer, is there any single period you would pick out as being the most rewarding ?

Ken (Replies - and here he may like to mention those on his list he highly respected; .. **Bryan Cave-Brown-Cave**, as a very helpful and encouraging Head of programmes, North region, **Thurston Holland**, and **Philip Robinson** as the first Organisers,..... **Ronnie Taylor**, **John Ammonds**, **Barney Colehan**, for their expertise as Television Light Entertainment producers, and during the 'Concert Hour' period, **Gordon Thorne** as head of regional Music, and **Paul Huband** as the Orchestral producer; the Children's programmes including 'Barn Dance' and 'Dance And Skylark, the first television series to feature the Liverpool Folk Group, **The Spinners**).

It was those people; those programmes and the tireless support of **Frank Taylor**, **Bob Dunscombe** and others who worked directly to me who gave North Regional Television programmes the same hallmark of quality enjoyed by North Regional Radio.

Trevor I began with a quotation from a letter at the very beginning of your BBC career. With your permission, let me end with another. It was sent to you by the Deputy Director General in August 1980.

'Dear Mr Lawson,

On the occasion of your retirement from the BBC on August 23rd, I am writing to express my appreciation of the excellent service you have given during the past 24 years.

Following a varied and distinguished theatrical career as both Scenic painter and Designer, with experience at many prestigious theatres including Covent Garden, you joined the BBC in February, 1956. From those heady - and overworked - early days, you have seen television in Manchester grow and develop into the flourishing plant it is today with the consequent expansion of Design Department from the single post you occupied. By your professionalism, dedication and unvarying enthusiasm, you have played an enormous part in this spectacular growth.'

The letter is signed, 'Gerard Mansell'. Thank you for reliving some of those moments with me.

.....(End - Interview 17).April,1990.