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START AUDIO

0:00:00

Trevor Hill: A history of north regional broadcasting. Kenneth Lawson. Interview 17. "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 per annum." That letter signed by Alan G Smith, 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 reopened having now been properly equipped for the job.

0:00:42 What, I wonder, impressed the head of television design, Richard Levin and the other members of the board so that you, Ken, were the successful candidate?

Kenneth Lawson: I think it was the knowledge and experience that I'd gained in repertory theatre. I'd done about five years of designing in London and Bristol and Oxford. There, I had to turn out sets on a weekly or fortnightly basis. I'd been rather fortunate, just at the end of working at Oxford, I came back to London and I had about seven plays in the London theatres. With this experience, I think it more or less clinched it.

Previous to me becoming a designer, I was actually a scenic artist. I took on the building and painting of the sets as well as designing them. Naturally, there were always managements that were interested in that aspect. I was most surprised at the interview, I thought I was probably far too inexperienced. It seemed that I, as they say, walked it.

0:01:59

Trevor Hill: So you got the famous letter from Alan Smith?

Kenneth Lawson: That was on 9th January 1956, yes. Later, I came up, I'm not sure of the date but I came up to see Brian ___[0:02:14], who was head of programmes and I think I also saw Philip Robinson who was television organiser.

0:02:22

Trevor Hill: He was also running radio outside broadcasts, wasn't he?

Kenneth Lawson: That's right, yes. Amazing man. Also, wasn't he known as the north countryman?

Trevor Hill: Yes, introducing the radio series and the former producer of 'Have A Go!'

Kenneth Lawson: I didn't know that.

0:02:40

Trevor Hill: Yes. Can you remember the very first programme that you worked on from Dickenson Road Studio, Ken?

Kenneth Lawson: Yes. I can remember it but not by name. I suppose you might call it a typical opener for the Manchester studio. Ronnie Taylor, head of light entertainment was responsible and a number of celebrities, both in light entertainment and sport, northern celebrities in other words, all came along. The Lord and Lady Mayoress of Manchester were there.

In that tiny studio, I was horrified to find that I also had to provide a tiered seating arrangement for the audience of about 100 with a centre gangway wide enough to allow the OB camera, which was a pretty big unwieldy thing to track down the centre. As the studio was a long studio, I made the first three sets split apart.

I had them on casters with a centre join and, as the camera went down the centre aisle, the scenery parted. After each act that appeared in front of it, the scenery parted. Naturally, the people I had in those days were all theatre people, like Frank Taylor and George Barber. Wonderful men for this sort of work and without their valuable assistance and experience, it probably would have been a fiasco.

0:04:22

Trevor Hill: The studio was incredibly small, wasn't it? Very cramped.

Kenneth Lawson: It was very narrow and long so, in other words, it made problems. With a production like that, which was supposed to

be a prestige thing... I certainly, thinking back on it all, it must have been a bit of a nightmare but I suppose with the theatre experience I'd had of scenery moving, I was probably able to cope with it.

0:04:56

Trevor Hill: The studio, of course, was a converted Wesleyan chapel. The opening was in Studio A, grandly called. Do you remember Studio B, which was just a cupboard?

Kenneth Lawson: Studio B was a back cupboard, yes. In that studio, there was a sign and I'm not sure whether it was, "Without vision, the people perish."

Trevor Hill: Yes. There was. It was up in the ceiling on one of the rafters.

Kenneth Lawson: "Without vision, the people perish," which we were all rather amused by since television had taken over. It was originally a film studio, Mancunian Films. All the walls were covered in Cabot's Quilting. Horrible and probably full of asbestos, I suspect.

Trevor Hill: Good old Mancunian Films with Frank Randle and all the others, 'Old Mother Riley'.

Kenneth Lawson: That's right.

0:05:52

Trevor Hill: I think they got the building in about 1947 and then the BBC came along and bought it from them, the Wesleyans having given it up. I don't know if you remember, Ken, but within three months of your joining us, you designed for me the set of what was to be the forerunner of a very famous programme, 'Blue Peter'. It was in May 1956 that we did the very first 'Children's Television Club'. That was an outside broadcast from aboard the Royal Iris steamer on the River Mersey. A great moment for all concerned, you managed to get us into Dickenson Road as from 20th May for this monthly live series.

Kenneth Lawson: Yes. That was a very interesting job because you wanted the set to have its own particular identity and also it had to be built in a sufficiently strong manner to survive a long running series, at least you hoped it will be and it proved to be that, of course, with Wilfred and Mable Pickles and the young Judith Chalmers.

Trevor Hill: Yes, at the other end of the celebrity scale.

Kenneth Lawson: It was an interesting task because we really were going into a contemporary style, weren't we, with that? It was a mixture of polished woods. I remember we had a very nice quality door built that didn't make a horrible scenic hollow sound and we had adjustable shelves on pegs and lots of nice pottery that we managed to get from Chelsea Potteries that gave it amusing pieces.

0:07:38

Trevor Hill: Frieda Lingstrom, who was then running children's television, said to me, "I do want to involve young people." If you remember, we had a workshop area and one week a potter came and the children threw their own pots. I have a fruit bowl that was made on the set of 'Children's Television Club'.

Do you remember that very hot June afternoon and we got a rock maker in from Blackpool and he was going to show the viewers and the young people in the studio how to put the lettering in the rock. We were having CTV, 'Children's Television Club'. I remember on this enormous iron sheet on which he rolled out the mixture for the rock, it all started to melt under the studio lights but you came to our rescue.

Kenneth Lawson: I think I managed to get some ice, rush around to the canteen and procure some ice, which probably helped a little. They were amusing days on that set because anything could happen.

0:08:39

Trevor Hill: Well, it did. Do you remember Cecil Korner, our floor manager?

Kenneth Lawson: I do, indeed.

0:08:44

Trevor Hill: The 'Children's Television Club' dog? Conker by name.

Kenneth Lawson: Yes, I'd forgotten that name.

Trevor Hill: Cecil would take him out on a lead when the dog wanted a bit of grass and then he'd always walk it back onto the set again and always managed to get into shot. I remember you telling me one day that Cecil had said to you, "Is there any chance of getting an appearance fee on the BBC?"

Kenneth Lawson: Yes, I think he had.

0:09:04

Trevor Hill: Another live Sunday programme we did together, Ken, from 1957 but, for this, you only occasionally got a design credit and I think that was mainly when we were filming was, of course, 'Sooty' and that went on as a BBC series until 1969.

Kenneth Lawson: Yes. They were very happy days working with Harry Corbett and Marjorie.

Trevor Hill: Brother Leslie doing Sweep.

Kenneth Lawson: Yes, I tried to remember his name. That's right.

0:09:32

Trevor Hill: What about those famous pigs?

Kenneth Lawson: Well, they were really quite incredible, I thought. They appeared on some sort of LE programme that Barney...

0:09:46

Trevor Hill: Which Barney Colehan had, yes. We're talking, of course, about 'Pinky and Perky', aren't we?

Kenneth Lawson: We are indeed. They arrived on a dress rail on casters hung and I'd never seen such a skilled design and manufacture. They were beautifully made and, of course, we had a number of series, I believe.

0:10:11

Trevor Hill: Yes. You designed, Ken, the very first pilot programme that we did. It was broadcast on 20th October 1957 and when the BBC decided they'd take a series, we did 'Pop Parade' where the pigs were running their own broadcasting station and you brought in, I think, a freelance designer.

Kenneth Lawson: Paul Bernard. He was very good on that kind of thing.

0:10:37

Trevor Hill: The pigs were very ably assisted by a young BBC announcer who made his television debut on the show. Do you remember his name?

Kenneth Lawson: Roger Moffat.

0:10:47

Trevor Hill: Yes. By far the most ambitious of all the 'Pinky and Perky' programmes we did from Dickenson Road was when the pigs went around the world in an old peddle steamer, the Melody Master, assisted by the then star of BBC's 'Z-Cars', John Slater. For that, of course, we had the services of a very talented young designer.

Kenneth Lawson: Yes, I can't remember whether he had actually become a designer at that point but certainly he came to me as a young design assistant absolutely by chance. He was studying architecture at Manchester University and, in the summer period, he wanted some employment. I'd seen a few drawings of his and he seemed a nice lad and he actually came from London, which made me feel, I suppose, a bit more at home. I took him on and he proved to be so marvellous that it wasn't too long before he became a designer. I did make him go back to university and finish his course. I said, "You might get a bit brassed off with television eventually and find it not satisfactory and you might want to go back to architecture so I do want you to complete your studies."

0:12:12

Trevor Hill: Are you going to mention his name?

Kenneth Lawson: Tim Harvey. A wonderful person to work with and the things he did were incredible. We both enjoyed our work so much and we had a wonderful working relationship.

Trevor Hill: It was Tim who not only designed the old peddle steamer, he also designed the large studio water tank on which the boat appeared to sail and the little radio controlled model that we used when it was supposed to be on the high seas.

Kenneth Lawson: I think those programmes and the design on them were really quite incredible.

0:12:48

Trevor Hill: We were also fortunate, of course, of having, as you mentioned, people of the calibre of Bob Dunscombe as scenic artist and Frank Taylor in charge of the scene hands. You got him in, didn't you, right from the start, Ken? Where did you find Frank?

Kenneth Lawson: From Hulme Hippodrome, which was built right next door to the BBC Playhouse.

0:13:06

Trevor Hill: Then, of course, we had a marvellous carpenter, didn't we?

Kenneth Lawson: Yes, we did. Cyril Wood. He came in and he'd been working on ecclesiastical woodwork, mainly churches and chapels

around the north and I got him absolutely by chance and he was so good and able. He brought in another colleague, equally well-trained, Eric [Torkinson 0:13:33]. Between the two of them, I had the best carpenters probably in the BBC.

Trevor Hill: They weren't chippies.

Kenneth Lawson: No, they weren't. They resented being called that. They were really skilled.

Trevor Hill: All their creative talents, beautifully lit in the studio by Tommy Mottram, as I recall.

Kenneth Lawson: That's right.

0:13:55

Trevor Hill: We certainly had quite a lot of drama with 'Pinky and Perky' being shipwrecked and all the adventures that befell them but now let's turn to another form of television drama. There was a period, Ken, when you, Tim Harvey with, I think, [Stuart Ferber 0:14:10] and Paul Montague as design assistants. You and Tim were designing an adult televised play production from Dickenson Road at a rate of, what, roughly one a month? Tell me about that side.

Kenneth Lawson: The thing is that occasionally I would have to engage a freelance when we would do it. We were doing other works

well, LE shows and so on so it didn't always work out that Tim and I could cope with it but, generally, we took them in alternately as they came up. There was no secret selection by the senior designer taking the best jobs. Tim and I just took them as they came.

We had Vivian Daniels as the head of drama. He'd been in radio in Leeds and he came over and we were working with him basically but, of course, occasionally either a London producer would come up, such as Naomi Capon from London came up to do Ionesco's play, 'The Chairs'. A most unusual play and I did that one. I also did 'Desk Set', an American play, which required a computer. I'd never seen a computer in those days. I forget what date that was but it seems a long way ago.

0:15:42

Trevor Hill: That one had a personality all of its own, hadn't it?

Kenneth Lawson: It did. It had to grunt and lights had to flash and ticker tape almost had to come out of it as well.

0:15:52

Trevor Hill: That was produced by our own regional television producer, Vivian, wasn't it?

Kenneth Lawson: Vivian A Daniels, yes. He also did 'So Many Children'. That was a play by Gerald Savory, who was once BBC head of drama. He wrote 'So Many Children' and we had Thora Hird

playing the mum looking after the ex-prisoners. They stayed at her house.

0:16:27

Trevor Hill: She was the landlady, wasn't she?

Kenneth Lawson: She was the landlady.

0:16:30

Trevor Hill: Who were the ex-prisoners?

Kenneth Lawson: I can't remember all of them because it's such a long ago but Arthur Lowe was in the cast and way down in the list of credits, a young actor by the name of Michael Caine.

0:16:44

Trevor Hill: Yes. I notice that the Daily Telegraph's television critic had little to say about Mr Caine's performance but he did comment, Ken, as follows, "Kenneth Lawson's settings 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, do they?

Kenneth Lawson: No, they don't.

0:17:22

Trevor Hill: There we are, a very nice crit for the designer in the Daily Telegraph. You designed for George Foa, the London-based director. He did what? I remember 'The Two Mrs Carrolls' and 'The Old Road'. Am I right in thinking that a young Albert Finney appeared in a play called 'June Evening' along with Violet Carson?

Kenneth Lawson: Yes, that's right. Young Finney. We also had Alfred Lynch.

0:17:54

Trevor Hill: Yes. 'June Evening', who wrote that?

Kenneth Lawson: I thought it was by Alan Plater.

0:18:01

Trevor Hill: Alan Plater, was it? I know it was a little like a forerunner of 'Coronation Street'. That property, incidentally, 'Coronation Street', was offered to and turned down by our very own Barney Colehan or so he called me in one of these interviews. It was called 'Florizel Street'. Ken, let's turn to some of the north's light entertainment successes on national television and here Barney's name comes very much to the fore. You did quite a lot of design work on the Ken Dodd shows. Were they as outside broadcasts?

Kenneth Lawson: Yes, from northern theatres, Manchester, Bolton, Blackpool, the Opera House and the Grand at Bolton. Many of them were done from the Playhouse. They were big productions and they weren't all recorded either so I had to make the scenery work and the scene hands certainly had to.

0:18:58

Trevor Hill: So you were back in real live theatre for a televised performance?

Kenneth Lawson: Yes. So all my past training and experience proved very valuable.

0:19:09

Trevor Hill: Of course, you did an awful lot of work on a television series, which still, I believe, holds the record for having a run of some 30 years. It was seen by hundreds of millions of people throughout the English speaking world and that, of course, was 'The Good Old Days'. Tell me something about that, Ken.

Kenneth Lawson: 'The Good Old Days', I actually designed backcloths to suit almost every act that might appear on the show and I had to, because there was no storage at the theatre for cloths on battens, I had to have them all painted in thin water paint on unprimed canvass so that they could be folded up just like a pair of curtains without cracking. I did I don't know how many but probably 30 or 40 designs but I never took a credit.

I thought that I liked the idea that, as the old theatre was there, that I'd keep my name out of it and hope that the viewer would think that they were all from the past. Some of them were deliberately sprayed over to give them an aged quality. I'd always painted them in colour but, since the series was first in monochrome, I had to have them all checked on when we were going into colour and about five of them were a little bit too bright so I had them sprayed over with a grey mottle.

0:20:50

Trevor Hill: I like that business about you not taking a credit but you were never a pushful sort, Ken. Turning back to the 1950s, we'll both remember Sunday afternoons at Dickenson Road. I'd been trying to rehearse with Harry Corbett and Sooty in the lavatory sized Studio B whilst in A, and using all the cameras available, would be the Northern Symphony Orchestra. You were looking after that. They were doing their live series of concerts. Design problems apart, Ken, with a live orchestra in a small studio, didn't our sound colleagues experience some acoustic problems?

Kenneth Lawson: Yes. The studio was completely dead. Obviously it had had the acoustic cladding applied when it was a film studio. They didn't want the sound of outside traffic to get through so they made quite a good job of it. This actually made the orchestra sound very dead also. The producer was complaining that the strings weren't sounding good. The French horns were complaining because they were blowing the French horn backwards, you see, as the instrument is designed, it tucks under your arm and behind them was velvet drapes.

After discussion, I actually came up with the idea of providing fibreglass acoustic panels above the string section and, in the future, we hung those at angles over the top of the orchestra. All this type of thing was done without true technical knowledge but years later, after it had proved successful in Dickenson Road, I noticed that the Albert Hall had these fibreglass discs suspended. It made me very amused.

Trevor Hill: A Lawson original?

Kenneth Lawson: A Lawson original, yes.

0:22:56

Trevor Hill: What did you do about the French horns? Put up hard screens?

Kenneth Lawson: I put up hard solid timber screens behind the horns and that made an enormous difference immediately.

Trevor Hill: That must have been Sidney Coulson, our principal horn player in those days.

Kenneth Lawson: Yes, it did.

0:23:14

Trevor Hill: Certainly a lot of exciting experimental work went on in those early days. I remember the very first time that we used the electronic system of inlay and overlay, which they had in London but we hadn't had. We wanted it for 'Pinky and Perky', I think, to put the pig's head inside a life buoy and also to be able to look out of the porthole windows and see things going past. Do you remember our very brilliant BBC North regional engineer, Ron Pearn, Ken?

Kenneth Lawson: Yes, I do indeed.

Trevor Hill: He made up his own form of inlay and overlay on a breadboard and just bits and pieces.

Kenneth Lawson: Presumably we didn't have any budget?

Trevor Hill: We had no budget and then, of course, London took a very dim view of this and said, "You're not allowed to use equipment if it hasn't been officially passed and tested and all the rest of it."

Kenneth Lawson: By the correct department?

Trevor Hill: Yes. It was make do and mend but, by Jove, some of the things that were made by the staff at Dickenson Road were truly remarkable, weren't they?

Kenneth Lawson: They were.

0:24:16

Trevor Hill: 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, Ken, of another studio experiment he tried out with a working title of the 'Teen and 20 Club'. The latter, of course, made television history when it was accepted some months later under the title of 'Top of the Pops'. You were in the beginning of 'Make Way for Music' and 'Top of the Pops' when it eventually hit the screens. Tell me about that.

Kenneth Lawson: Yes, both of them. 'Make Way for Music', I think it was Barney who rang me and said could I meet him at the Queens Hotel, Manchester to talk over a new programme idea with Alyn Ainsworth. The only time that any of us were available was lunchtime so, over a glass of refreshment, I was given the idea that they wanted to use the Northern Dance Orchestra for television but they had no idea of how to do it in the very limited studio.

I came up with the idea that if we treated it as a rehearsal and we didn't use scenery but hung black drapes around the whole studio, the cameras could hide behind the drapes and just pop out when required and take the shots. The lighting man only had to light the musicians and he didn't have to worry about the drapes. It couldn't have been done, for instance, with a drape or scenery in the normal sense because the lighting would have been impossible with shadows and so on in such a narrow confine.

Trevor Hill: That was something entirely new to television and, of course, it brought right to the fore our original 'Pinky and Perky' presenter, Roger Moffat with Sheila Buxton. They were marvellous programmes.

Kenneth Lawson: Later, of course, as you say, the 'Teen and 20 Club' was a forerunner of 'Top of the Pops', that one was originally put in as a 13 week series with London producer, Johnnie Stewart. He rang me and said that he wanted to come up and talk about a programme. I'm not sure that I even had a title for it at that point. He arrived and we chatted it over and I found out that on the date that they wanted to start it, I was the only person available.

I had to provide a number of areas in the studio for different acts and this kind of music really wasn't my scene so I had to rely on my children a great deal there. They had already seen The Beatles in a tent at five shillings admission fee in Flixton and I hadn't actually heard of them hardly at that point. They were just newcomers to me. I designed, I think, a very interesting set, which, much to my surprise, proved to work and also to be admired and liked by everybody and I managed to provide all the changes that went on weekly.

It was live certainly for that first year. I can't remember when we started to record but it started early in the morning with rehearsals and we had a different DJ every week and there was a large desk with television screens and two turntables and people like Jimmy Savile and David Jacobs. They took it in turns to do the introductions. That was quite a hairy period in terms of design but I managed to make a satisfactory job. I had to use back projection there as well, which we hadn't used

in the studio and that had its problems but a man came up from London every week to operate it.

0:28:43

Trevor Hill: I think the first time we tried, of course, back projection was with the 'Pinky and Perky' series. An ordinary film projector, of course, with a three blade shutter and the picture used to start barring up. I discovered I had a Kodak Pageant machine with a two blade shutter and I brought that in and we discovered that we could actually go out and do some filming, moving backgrounds, put them on that Kodak Pageant 16mm projector, put them on a screen, point a camera at them and it worked.

There came a time when other departments would say to me, "Could we borrow your projector, Trevor?" and I used to say, doing a Cecil Korer, "You may hire my machine, if you like." You did, though, design for a more series of type of programme, didn't you, I think mainly for BBC2, was it?

Kenneth Lawson: Yes. The London producers wanted a studio and I designed for 'Call My Bluff' and also for 'Face the Music'. Both of those were long running series and, much to my surprise, the design was liked, which was gratifying, I suppose. The sets actually lasted without change for two or three years. They were very enjoyable days working in colour. They were programmes of a slightly different nature to what I'd been used to.

0:30:21

Trevor Hill: In the formative years, as our very first television designer in the north region and then as our senior designer, is there any single period that you would pick out as being the most rewarding to you? I don't mean financially rewarding but in terms of job satisfaction?

Kenneth Lawson: I think, overall, I had a wonderfully mixed bag of programmes to work on for which I'm eternally grateful.

Trevor Hill: They say that variety is the spice of life. Ken, I began, thanks to you, quoting from a letter at the very beginning of your BBC career. With your permission, let me end with another, which you've also kindly given to me from your collection of souvenirs. This letter was sent to you by the deputy director general in August 1980 at the time of your retirement.

He says, "Dear Mr Lawson, on the occasion of your retirement from the BBC on 23rd August, I'm 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 in many prestigious theatres, including Covent Garden, you joined the BBC in February 1956.

From those heady and overworked early days, you've seen television in Manchester grow and develop into the flourishing plant that it is today with the consequent expansion of the design department from the single post you occupied. By your professionalism, dedication and unvarying enthusiasm, you played an enormous part in this spectacular growth." The letter is signed Gerard Mansell. Ken, thank you for reliving some of those moments with me.

END AUDIO

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