

Gang Shows



Item Code FS295312 Jan/99 Edition no 1 (103780)

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When the curtain rang down on the last night of the Final London Gang Show at the Gaumont State Theatre, Kilburn in October 1974, a Scouting era ended. For though there are still many Gang Shows staged annually by Scouts, in the memories of thousands of people for years to come, the name will only mean one thing - the **London** Gang Show, which made its debut in 1932 and laughed and sang its way into Scouting history.

The London Gang Show was the brainchild of an anonymous 'Holborn Rover' who was later revealed as a certain Ralph Reader, already well known in the professional theatre as a leading dance director and performer with shows on both sides of the Atlantic. His name was to become synonymous with Scout Gang Shows everywhere.

That 1932 production ran for three nights at London's Scala Theatre and was an immediate success. In each succeeding year, even when the Show moved to larger theatres, seats were invariably sold out and thousands of unlucky applicants had their money returned.

Ralph Reader's share in this success became legendary. He not only produced - he wrote the scenarios, over three hundred sketches and around four hundred songs. The most celebrated of his compositions - 'Crest of a Wave' - was also one of the first he wrote.

Later, several Gang Show songs and sketches were to be used professionally. 'Strolling', the hit song of the 1958 production, became one of the most successful numbers in the Crazy Gang Show and, sung by Bud Flanagan, was a high spot in the 1965 Royal Command Performance at the London Palladium!

The London Gang Show itself achieved the honour of being the first amateur company to appear in a Royal Command Performance. That was in 1937 and there were subsequent appearances in 1957 and 1964. In 1972, the Queen and Prince Philip attended the 40th Anniversary Gang Show and, in

all, members of the Royal Family attended the Show on no less than nine different occasions.

The Show was always well dressed. Something like 600 costumes, many of them specially made, were used each year and most of the stage sets were specially built.

All the cast and most of the back stage staff were Members of the Scout Movement. There were about 150 in each Show, most coming from Scout Districts in London and the Home Counties. Ages ranged from 12 to 50 but with a predominance of teenagers.

The cast received no payment. Neither, throughout the three months of rehearsal and two weeks of actual performances, were they paid expenses for meals or travel. To be chosen for the Show was its own reward.

In 1937, the whole of the Gang Show cast appeared in a full length feature called 'The Gang Show', directed by Herbert Wilcox and starring Gina Marlow and Ralph Reader. Members of the cast have performed with practically all the famous names in show business. Several long playing records as well as E.P.'s and singles have been made of the Show. The Gang featured several times on the radio and, with the coming of television, appeared on this new medium too.

If the London Gang Show claimed the most notice, it was by no means the only Gang Show. Scouts in all major towns and cities in the UK produced their own versions with local talent and achieved remarkable high standards, filling the largest available theatres. Nor did it end there. Gang Shows spread across the world. Australia, Canada, Malaysia, Mauritius, New Zealand, the United States - these and other countries have greatly benefited from Ralph Reader's efforts. He has never asked for a single penny in royalties from the Movement.

So we come back to 1974 and the Final Gang Show. Ralph, by now a Commander of the Order of the British Empire and aged 71, had decided to retire.

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There was much discussion as to whether the Show should carry on without a successor. But the task of replacing his creative talent and dynamism would be formidable for anyone. There was, too, the great problem of mounting costs, now accelerated by inflation, in staging the Show.

Better to close the Show at the height of success than continue and risk loss of quality. With characteristic generosity, Ralph gave his vast store of material for the use of the Scouts of the world for all time. Though there is no longer a London Gang Show, local Shows continue to flourish throughout the country.

In some cases the form and content have been altered slightly in response to changing public taste whilst others still successfully maintain the traditional format. One thing, however, is certain - there will always be a place in Scout Shows for the sketches and songs of Ralph Reader.