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Multi-talented Men

Part I

By Kathrine Sorley Walker

There has never been a time when the British performing arts have more closely networked than in the 1920s and 1930s. It was a period when creative artists in drama, music, dance and design moved freely and frequently between their various disciplines, setting up fruitful personal relationships and constantly nourished by new ideas and developments. Whatever their individual differences of background and education, they eventually became part of the social and professional circles that mainly existed in or near London. Their careers depended on shared patrons or managements, and work was often obtained by word of mouth recommendations and contacts.

Both in Britain and abroad it was a much smaller and more manageable art world than that of today. Far fewer people were involved and in fact almost everyone knew everyone, even internationally. Young aspirants in the theatre worked in a variety of ways, according to what opportunities arose – dancing, acting, singing, arranging dances and group movements, designing sets, costumes and masks. They became completely versatile in their ability to cope with anything connected with the theatre, understanding and cooperating with drama directors, musicians and conductors, scene painters, stage staff and wardrobe artists; soon, too, they were eagerly embracing the possibilities of cin-

ema and television, learning to deal with film directors and camera men. All this applied – and is well documented – to Frederick Ashton and Antony Tudor; but it is interestingly reflected in other, less well-remembered, artists. Two of these can serve as examples: Hedley Briggs and William Chappell, both of importance during their lives. Both men were dancers, designers and later directors. Briggs, additionally, was a character actor of repute.

Hedley Briggs, 1907-1968

Briggs (according to *Who's Who in the Theatre, 1947* his full surname was Gawthorne-Briggs) was born on March 29, 1907, at King's Norton near Birmingham, the son of Joseph Ward Gawthorne-Briggs and his wife Lucy (Lane). He had a brother (who was killed in World War I) and sisters. Although he had no theatrical family background he must have been determined to act, and when he was fourteen he left school when he had the chance of joining Barry Jackson's admirable Birmingham Repertory Theatre as fledgling actor and (from August 1923) assistant stage manager. He made his acting debut as Juanillo in G. Martinez Sierra's *The Two Shepherds* (a tragic story of a half-civilised Spanish village) on October 29, 1921. During 1922 he acted small roles - in March he was the Fiancé in a Leighton Lucas adaptation of Scarlatti's *The Shepherds and the Chimney Sweep*. Lucas (according to Grove's *Dictionary of Music*) 'had come to music through dance and drama'. A student of Astafieva and Cecchetti, he was a member of the Diaghilev Ballet from 1918 to 1921, when he left to join Birmingham Rep; he stayed with them until 1923, and it seems probable that he was Briggs' first ballet teacher; he studied later with Anton Dolin and Phyllis Bedells. In June 1922 Birmingham Rep gave three plays (Shaw's *Getting Married*, Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* and Harold Chapin's *The New Mortality*) at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre at Stratford-upon-Avon during the Summer Festival; and the Ginner-Mawer School of Dance and Drama contributed two matinees of ballet and mime. Irene Mawer was famously connected with Carré's 3-act

mime play, *L'Enfant prodigue*, and apparently Briggs was added to the cast to play the Baron. In December 1922, when the Birmingham Rep company appeared in London at the Regent Theatre in Pentonville Road near King's Cross, the lively and attractive teenager doubled as Colonel MacMashit and Harlequin in Jackson's own comedy *The Christmas Party*. This was a delightful children's entertainment. *The Times* (December 21) was enthusiastic: 'Barry Jackson has become a child again himself. It has no real story, it is just a series of nursery episodes loosely knit together'. Two siblings, Christopher and Evangeline, had measles, and amused themselves by having an imaginary party to which they invited characters like Santa Claus, the Fine Lady from Banbury Cross with her horse, Bo-Peep, Red Riding Hood, Cinderella and Harlequin. The actors 'in a very large cast, are exactly as they should be'. During the season he was also in the notably successful revival of Rutland Boughton's opera *The Immortal Hour*, this time directed and conducted by Leighton Lucas, which starred Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies; it reached its 300th performance in March 1924.

Jackson had been having financial and theatre attendance problems in Birmingham and at this point he also went into management to stage performances in London, some revived from Birmingham. Apart from the Regent, these were later at the Court (Royal Court) Theatre in Sloane Square and the Kingsway Theatre. In May 1923 Briggs was in the cast of *The Insect Play* (in which John Gielgud was Felix). It was a play that *The Times* (May 23) did not like - 'entomology is...to the average playgoer a somewhat sleepy subject' - and in November he acted *The Gentleman in White* in Georg Kaiser's expressionist play *Gas*. All in all, during his time with Birmingham Rep in its home and London activities, he was involved in some capacity in an extraordinary variety of plays (including controversial 'modern dress' productions of *Cymbeline* and *Hamlet*).

The first performance of Shaw's five-part *Back to Methusaleh* was staged in Birmingham from October 9 to 27, 1923, when Briggs was one of the youths in Part V (*As Far as Thought can Reach*), in which

