

Recounting the Life of Professional Magician and Leading Punch & Judy Man John Styles

Courtesy - "THE MAGIC CIRCULAR" - John Derris & "THE WORLD'S FAIR" - Peter Blanchard

Born in Walthamstow, East London, John Styles first had his interest in magic aroused by magicians he saw performing at the Walthamstow Palace, the Hackney Empire and the Finsbury Park Empire.

There was little or no television in these early post-war years and variety shows were still popular. For John to enter these theatres was to escape the grey, colourless, glamour-starved surroundings that existed following the Second World War. Here he entered another world - bright lights, colourful scenery, costumes, music and laughter and an array of versatile performers - particularly magicians.

Magicians amused and mystified him and he would hurry backstage after the show to get their autographs. His fascination with magic was fired by many of those he met and he was soon emulating them, doing tricks he'd learned from borrowed library books.

On one such visit backstage he learned of the London Society of Magician's Club which had a Student Section, which he joined. Here he kept hearing the name "Oscar Oswald", whose real name was Cuthbert Alfred Games Quantrill, a retired Marylebone Police Court Jailer who had opened a small basement magic shop off Baker Street, selling second-hand magic tricks, ventriloquist's dummies and Punch & Judy puppets.

It became a regular haunt for John where he acquired not only magic tricks and their secrets but also the wisdom of Oswald, who was also one of the leading children's entertainers of the day.

He clearly took to the boy for one day in a carefully constructed comment he said, "I'm looking for a young chap to help me here - someone about your age - if you hear of anyone perhaps you'd let me know". John, then employed in an office, bored and fired with the idea of being a Magician, told his parents, who were appalled. They were proud that their young son was in a respectable job with good prospects and were horrified at the thought of him working in "show business" - a profession they knew nothing about.

However, his mother had observed that he could make audiences laugh and must have persuaded his father to let him work for Oscar until he was called up for his two years National Service, after which he was told that he would have to settle down to a "proper" career.

He joined Oscar for what he describes as "the happiest two years of my working life", learning the "trade of the tricks" and meeting all the leading professionals working the theatres and night clubs in London's West End (amongst them a young Tommy Cooper an unassuming David Nixon) and saw his employer first-hand performing Punch & Judy but with no desire to go down that path John continued to do his magic in talent competitions, town hall shows and children's parties.

One day, Oscar announced that he had mistakenly taken a double booking for his Punch & Judy show and that he wanted John to do one of the engagements for him.

John declined, explaining that he had no desire to perform Punch for many reasons - he didn't really know the full story. Oscar said that John could watch and learn at his

performance the following Saturday. Then John explained that he could not really afford to buy all the equipment, puppets and booth (which then would have cost around £50-£60). Oscar pointed to a second-hand set in the corner, "You can have that lot for £5". "I haven't got £5", protested John. "Don't worry ", said Oscar, "I'll stop it two shillings and sixpence (12 1/2p) out of your wages until it's paid for". Oscar could be very persuasive and John reluctantly gave in.

He had witnessed just how strenuous the performance could be, the physical effort required , the dramatic ability, the strain on the voice. the extra amount of equipment he would have to carry, he could not drive and it was all a daunting prospect - but the most daunting of all was mastering the "swazzle", the tiny instrument held in the mouth throughout the performance that gave Punch his distinctive and authentic squeaky voice.

Practising the swazzle at home with rasping sounds coming from the back of his throat alarmed his parents greatly and convinced them that he would choke to death, so he went off to nearby Epping Forest where he screeched Punch's catchphrase, "That's the way to do it", probably startling not only the birds in the trees but also the courting couples in the long grass!

"Treat Mr Punch right - and you'll never be left" predicted Oscar, and how true that proved to be, for little did John know as he stepped into the world of Punchinello that it would lead him to becoming one of the leading practitioners of the art, giving him access to people and places beyond his wildest dreams.

National Service put him in the Royal Army Pay Corps and, being an entertainer, soon brought him benefits. Consequently, he was earmarked for the Army Concert Party and spent his time performing at all types of military venues.

1953 saw the Queen's Coronation. Celebration parties were taking place everywhere and , although still in the Army, John managed to arrange some of his leave entitlement to accept party engagements.

Punch & Judy was now a feature in his act and after one street party show an attractive girl , about his own age, approached him, asking questions about the puppets and offering to help carry the cases to the bus stop. A few years later he was carrying her over the threshold. "I carried his cases then and 50 years later, I'm still doing it"! says his wife, Barbara.

At one time he did have a "proper" job - to secure the income needed to support a home and a wife but he was in such demand as an entertainer and so popular did he become that he used up all his holiday and sick leave fulfilling engagements, sometimes he even resorted to phantom illnesses. This continued for some time until Barbara suggested that he tried going "full-time" - a very courageous proposition as they now had their first son, Robert and it would mean giving up a secure job with a regular wage, yearly increments, paid sick leave,pension, etc., just to sit and wait for the telephone to ring. However, with an insatiable desire to get fully back into the business he took the step - and has never looked back.

Bookings started to roll in after he was accepted by to the Concert Artists' Association and his career began to move forward full steam - celebrity concerts - cruises - cabaret and television appearances on programmes such as "The Avengers", "Crackerjack", "Play School", "Playaway", "Randall & Hopkirk Decd.", "Rainbow" and "It's Marty Feldman". These, together with prestigious private engagements found him performing for celebrities such as Alma Cogan, Lionel Bart and The Beatles - and all helped to raise his profile.

The quality of John's work is confirmed by the number of engagements and repeat bookings he receives from the great and the good. His list of past clients include many Lords and Ladies, the Saatchi, Forte, Tesco, Marks and Spencer, and Delfont families, Bruce Forsyth, David Bailey, Michael Aspel, Roy Hudd, Honor Blackman, Ronnie Corbett, Judith Chalmers, Trevor Nunn & Imogene Stubbs, Mrs Al Fayed, Jane Asher & Gerald Scarfe, Giles Brandreth, Clive Dunn and Harry Hill and Graham Hill, Sir John Mills and many, many more.

His first overseas engagement was to present his Punch & Judy show at an International Puppet Festival in Germany, which led to him being invited to perform in Belgium, Finland, Holland, Denmark, Spain, Italy and Canada... Through the years he has had the honour to represent his country in British promotions all around the world including, Singapore, Qatar, Vancouver and many times in the U.S.A.

John reports that Mr Punch, his wife Judy and their unique, quirky and irreverent sense of humour have great appeal to audiences wherever they strut their stuff - and have proved great ambassadors for this country.

He journeyed repeatedly to Aaman, Jordan to entertain King Hussein and all the Royal Family and, on more than one occasion has entertained the children of the Sultan of Brunei, also King Constantine of Greece and his family and HRH. Diana, The Princess of Wales ,together with Prince's William and Harry.

"Smollensky's" the famed London West End restaurant called John in to spice up attendances for their Saturday lunchtime trade. The versatile magician who had a long and sound apprenticeship in the business created a special close-up show that brought immediate and dramatic improvements in the restaurant bookings. Thousands of visitors to London will have enjoyed John's skills because he has now performed there for 20 years!

These days John is still the globe-trotting Wizard and Punchman from Kent - although some invitations do not always transpire. Tuition in London on a card trick for a film led to screen play writer Tom Stoppard and producers asking John to fly out to Los Angeles and perform the sequence himself in the film "Restoration", in a scene with Meg Ryan and Robert Downey Jnr. The engagement did not come to fruition because the American Immigration Authority could not provide the necessary work permit and visa in time.

When his phone rings now the enquiry can take him anywhere, an International Folk Festival abroad, a local Senior Citizen's Club or a disabled servicemen and women's home, or a Church, Hospital or School Fete, a prestigious corporate event or a small family party, an International Magic Convention or a mentally or physically handicapped club.

John has now come a long way from when Oscar induced a truculent youth to "take up the dolls". It has proved a passion that has brought him world fame (he's even listed as a Hollywood Celebrity!). After lecturing at the Royal Society of Arts he was unanimously elected a Fellow and he has had the distinction of lecturing at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, he has also received the degree of Member of the INNER Magic Circle with Gold Star and the Carlton Award for Comedy in Magic. He is a founding member of The Punch and Judy Fellowship and the Punch & Judy College of Professors which he hopes will continue to encourage the highest standards of performance in this ancient art - whose image he has undoubtedly elevated in an illustrious career.

As an active member of the Grand Order Water Rats he has no intention of hanging up his puppets. In robust good health he says, "As long as the telephone rings and people want me to perform, I'll continue"

Mr Punch has controversially entertained his audiences through the reign of 16 monarchs, for it was on the 9th May, 1662 that Samuel Pepys noted in his diary that he had witnessed a performance in London's Covent Garden, of "Pollicinella" (or "Punchinello" and eventually just plain "Punch"), an Italian marionette play - not Punch and Judy - but certainly Punch's ancestor.

During the next 343 years Mr Punch ingratiated himself into the hearts of the British people and went on to become our national puppet - a folk hero - always in attendance at victory celebrations, fairs, public holidays, royal weddings, coronations and jubilee's and is now an internationally famous puppet character - as popular as ever, winning hearts around the world.

His performance has inspired composers, comedians, writers, painters, actors and even had a satirical magazine named after him. Although now considered a children's entertainment, a skilful performance can still captivate an adult audience.

John was recently included in the Queen's New Year Honours List and at Buckingham Palace received an MBE for "Services to the Arts (Especially Punch & Judy Shows)" Although it is unlikely that "Mr. punch", the eternal anarchist, would wish to be embraced by the Establishment, John was naturally honoured to be chosen for this award.

He has also been President of the International Brotherhood of Magicians - British Ring, The largest magical society in the country with close to 2000 members.

Probably not since 1662 when the "Pollicinella" puppeteer "Signor Bologna" was summoned to Whitehall to receive a medal (worth £25) from King Charles II has a Punch & Judy man been so honoured..