

The Serpent at the Center of the Stage

by Clifford Bevan

1942 was not a good year in Britain although, three years into the Second World War, things were beginning to improve. American troops landed in Northern Ireland in January, in August Prime Minister Churchill met General Secretary Stalin for the first time, and in October General Montgomery launched his North African offensive. But coal, gas, electricity, and sweets were rationed, joining petrol and food which had been rationed since 1940 and clothes since 1941. Streetlights were switched off at night and vehicle lights dimmed in the blackout, an ingenious but hazardous method of confusing visiting aircraft.

Morale was kept up by the stirring speeches of Sir Winston Churchill and the government's enlightened decision to support professional bands, orchestras, concert parties, and dance troupes performing nationwide, often sent to workers in factory canteens. After an initial panic, theaters and cinemas were reopened and, once audiences had negotiated the dark and dangerous streets, there was entertainment to be had. In living rooms, the Light and Home Service wireless programs of the BBC provided relaxing or stimulating fare. One of the most celebrated broadcasters was the author J. B. Priestley who read his specially commissioned wireless novel *Let the People Sing* in weekly installments. Later his broadcasts following the nine o'clock news were listened to by millions for their reassuringly quiet patriotism. He was still writing for the stage, and on 5 February 1942 his "comedy of broadcasting," *Good Night Children*, opened at London's New Theatre. As a straight-talking Yorkshireman, he did a good job of publicly biting the hand that fed him, for the E.B.C. (English Broadcasting Company) where the action takes place is a thinly disguised B.B.C., and at least one reviewer pointed out that

the play shows how the E.B.C. "throw the suffocating weight of a gentlemanly wet-blanket over independent thought and artistic sensibility. Anything is allowed, we are told, as long as the vital spark is successfully extinguished."

The title was of great significance, since from 1923 until 1964, a wholesome and much-loved program called *Children's Hour* was broadcast at five o'clock daily on the B.B.C. Home Service. The presenters, called by their honorary names of uncle or aunt, spoke, acted, and sang directly to the nation's children. In charge was Derek McCulloch, "Uncle Mac," who ended every program with the reassuringly inclusive farewell: "Good Night Children...everywhere." Since no children listening could be certain that they wouldn't have a bomb dropped on them between supper and breakfast, it was a much-appreciated kind thought. None of them knew, until the publication of Christopher Andrew's book *The Defence of the Realm* over sixty years later in 2009, that Uncle Mac's other job, under his real name of Maxwell Knight, was that of a spy-runner for the British intelligence-gathering service MI5.

There was also something unusual in the dramatis personae of this play, for amongst a producer, an actress, an engineer, an announcer and the effects boy, is an ancient musician, Matthew Punnet. He is central to the action, which deals with the producer's attempts (in the words of the reviewer in *The Spectator*), "to produce a program set in the imaginary county of Bassetshire (first imagined, incidentally, by the Victorian novelist Anthony Trollope) with genuine local color in the shape of an aged yokel who can play the serpent." *The New Statesman* critic was unhappy about the way in which this character was portrayed, pointing out "two rustics, grand-daughter and the ancient player of a village

instrument called the 'serpent' [note this word, as found in the American folk-song "The Pesky Serpent"] are for some reasons or other produced in the spirit of the wildest charade.... Some Basset girls and old men still talk Basset, but that does not mean that they resemble the village idiots of fiction."

We know who played the part of Matthew Punnet: the actor Meadows White, who appeared in supporting roles in London's West End and several films up to 1955. But what part did playing the serpent actually play in the play?

TRISTAN SPROTT [producer]: By the way, I've discovered the most fabulous ancient—straight out of Hardy—who plays the serpent. I'm practically building to-night's programme round that serpent.

[Its first appearance:]

And this is the cue for the entrance of MATTHEW PUNNET, a very ancient be-whiskered rustic who arrives carrying a serpent of great size and blackness. His speech is almost unintelligible. At first he just comes a step inside. Marnin, marnin. (Chuckles horribly.) Be he E.B.C.? If he be E.B.C. I be setting rought ahere awaitin' my tarn to play ould serpent. Chuckles, produces one deep note and waits for their applause.

[Later]:

. . . there is a queer deep note from PUNNET's serpent.

TRISTAN [producer] (*shrieking*).

No, no, no. No serpent yet. . . .

PUNNET (*unintelligibly*): Ef oi come 'ere to play sarpent, oi wants to play sarpent.

[Later still]:

HAYCRAFT [announcer, now rehearsing his part]: An' only man in all Basset as can still play the ould sarpent.