

Street Entertainment

By

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Entertainment in its many guises has always been of interest to me – both as an audience and participant.

As I delved into its history it became apparent that the starting point must have been when human beings grouped together and began to form communities. Humans appear to have had an urge to entertain; and for the need to be entertained, no progress in technology has dampened this.

Could it be then, this is the **oldest profession** and not something else entirely!!!.

Street Entertainment

Street entertainers are part of a long tradition, which all but disappeared from our streets - during two world wars.

In my first 'entertainment' talks – I addressed early drama, being performed out of doors – the 'Mystery' and 'Miracle plays! We heard of the travelling minstrels, jugglers – the street performers who entertained on execution days – the strolling players who performed in town squares, market places, inn yards and villages, festivals up and down the country.

Gradually troupes of actors were licensed and performed formally for paying audiences at Inns; but it wasn't long before, the need and desire for amphitheatres sprang up and entertainment became more formalised – players formed companies with managers and the public paid to be entertained.

Street entertainment still flourished in towns and villages on market days feast days but became thought of as a means of begging and the entertainers – closely associated to criminal classes.

The Music Hall was born out of public houses and supper rooms and catered for those who enjoyed some singing, dancing, speciality acts – featuring juggling, knife throwing, magicians, and all sorts of entertainments that street entertainers provided. If a street entertainer could get his or her foot in the door of a music hall they were made, earning a regular fee – that provided security and self-worth. They were the chosen ones, and many became stars and household names.

Those entertainers who did not make it to the legitimate theatre, carried on – always seeking out places where there were large gatherings – market days, festivals and so on. A sort after spot was outside of a theatre, crowds going in and crowds coming out, maybe having partaken of a few drinks and feeling relaxed and merry – performers in the street could hope for a few coppers from those who could afford the price of a seat in a proper theatre.

Most certainly in the past Britain's streets were much livelier places. Nowadays largely devoid of entertainment.

Only 50 or 60 years ago it was not uncommon to hear the mellifluous hum of an accordion in the main thoroughfares of towns up and down the country. The accordion player would dangle a cloth bag for donations from his instrument and maybe a cardboard notice round his neck with the words "Blind" thank you – or "Wounded in the War" or a tin laid on a piece of material on the ground.

Today as a result of strict policing and licensing laws, buskers play their violins or guitars with backing tapes in designated spots. In London often within the subterranean tunnels at Underground stations.

The lost world of street entertainment can still be glimpsed in Edinburgh's yearly festival or at Covent Garden – but largely gone from the town centre of our big cities, Exeter, Manchester, Leeds, Glasgow, Birmingham etc etc.

The following two vignettes of the street entertainers in the 16th and 19th Centuries reveal how very different things were – once upon a time.

Let's take a look at a typical market day in Canterbury in the 16th Century. Mingling with the sounds from pens of sheep, pigs and cattle, the pedlars shouting their wares piled up on trays hanging in front of them – the stench of manure, urine and rotting vegetables, - the sound of voices can be heard singing in harmony to the accompaniment of a fiddle, pipe and tambour. In this Tudor street, the singers were known as minstrels and they performed at weddings, funerals or wakes. Their standard fare seems to have bawdy songs and they were closely associated with beggars and criminals.

Within the crowd – locals move aside to see a lumbering dancing brown bear. His minder brandishes a stick and holds the bear by a leash attached to his muzzle. A large space is cleared for a group of six acrobats ending with a human triangle, 3 standing on the shoulders of the others. Threading his way through the crowd is the Town Crier clanging his bell and shouting the news of Drakes recent success against the Spanish Armada. A group of yokels gather around a juggler or as we would call him – a conjuror or magician.

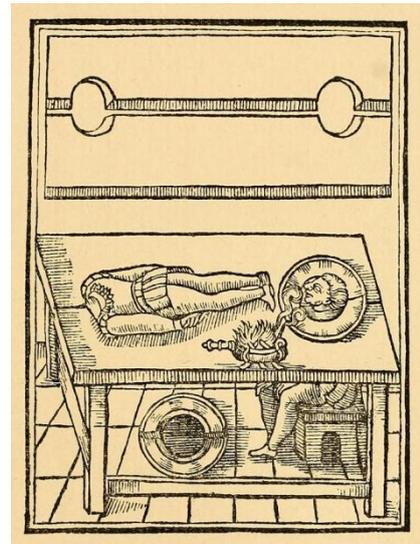
Elizabethans commonly believed that jugglers had supernatural powers. We know quite a lot about 16th Century jugglers because a Kentish gentleman – Reginald Scott was determined to stamp out this belief in wizardry and the powers of jugglers. To achieve this he published his "Discoverie of Witchcraft" in 1584. He explained how tricks were performed. He was at pains to prove that witchcraft and magic were not real – that witches could not contact the devil and cast spells or fly in the air on broomsticks – and that the miraculous displays by street magicians were instead the results of trickery to delude the audience. But the masses could not read in those days!!

In order to demonstrate Scott provided a catalogue of the various methods employed by the jugglers / magicians. Contemporary writers were worried that street magicians could keep superstitions alive among the credulous, who failed to see that they were simply tricks and might believe that magicians really did have supernatural powers. Scott argued that if these tricks were done for entertainment and enjoyment and not intended to cause harm nor prophaning in Gods name – then they are

neither impious nor unlawful. Scott enjoyed watching the jugglers and magicians and he had printed a useful guide on how to emulate the tricks. So if you wanted to know how to stick a bodkin through your head or put a ring through your cheek Scott's book would tell you how.

Many of the acts he describes are still familiar today – pretending to move several table tennis size balls from your mouth, palming coins, putting coins in the ear and out through the mouth. One spectacular trick in Scott's book involved the juggler stabbing himself in the stomach – providing shrieks of horror and wonder from the audience – as blood spurted from the wound – (and the secret) – involved creating a false stomach and chest out of cardboard – attaching it to the front of the body – and before the magician put this on – he would fix a metal plate next to his skin – a bladder of sheep or pigs blood in front of the plate and expand his stomach so blood spurted out. To the amazement of the beholders.

The Elizabethan jugglers' great set piece was the beheading of "John the Baptist" astonished spectators – saw the legs and torso of "John the Baptist" sticking out from one end of a table while his head rested on a pewter plate at the other end. The effect was created by cutting two holes in a table – two men hid underneath. One stood on his head so that his torso and legs appeared from one hole – while the second man put his head through the hole at the other end of the table and rested his head on the plate. The tableau was made more realistic when dough kneaded with animals blood – represented severed flesh. Doubtless people in the audience screamed and perhaps fainted.



Let us now move on to the 19th Century street scene. By this time the magicians tricks and tableaus have become Music Hall acts. "John the Baptist" replaced by an act involving sawing a woman in half.

The streets look different. There are now pavements with sturdy metal bollards to prevent carriages running over pedestrians – while horse drawn carriages and omnibuses with wooden or metal wheels scrape over shiny cobbles. Horses whinnying – an urchin might sweep aside piles of steaming manure so a lady in her crinoline and dainty slippers can cross the road without getting her skirts and slippers mucky and the urchin hopes for a small reward for his trouble.

The air is thick with pungent smells – chimney smoke, manure, food smells from vegetable stalls, hot potato sellers. We can hear the cry of the water seller, the ringing bell of the pie-man, the girl with her tray calling "sweet lavender".

Now the voices of the entertainers can be heard above the hubbub. Street singers – they generally concentrated on hymns or popular songs of the day – pinched from the music hall.

In other streets a social investigator of the day Henry Mayhew reported seeing a blind Scotsman playing a violoncello¹, a German band, a French hurdy-gurdy² play, a Scottish piper and a couple of dancing girls.

Victorian singers did not share our modern day sensitivities and in the middle of the century there was a fashion and passion for black faced singers – singers who blacked their faces and sang what they believed to be songs belonging to the black folk from the United States.

Mayhew interviewed a 6 man troupe of black faced minstrels who sang regularly in Oxford Street, and the various markets of central London. The black and white minstrels were indeed popular on radio and television until the late 50's and early 60's.

Street entertainers flourished throughout the 19th century – Henry Mayhew interviewed – clowns, sword / knife and snake swallowers, stilt walkers, knife throwers, strongmen, owners of dancing dogs. Reginald Scott would have recognised all of these. There were however, some new magical inventions appearing, street performers exploiting new technologies. For example – Mayhew spoke to a man who had a number of telescopes – which he set up on clear nights – he charged 1 penny at a time to look at the night sky. This seems to have been a lucrative business, because according to Mayhew the chap made £125 a year in 1850, equivalent to £10,500 in today's money.

There was an Italian who came to London and made a living by exhibiting mechanical figures which he designed and had made in Germany. Something that could turn up on the Antiques Road Show.

By the 1930's the aristocrats of street entertainers were acrobats – who according to George Orwell could earn around £5 a week on a good pitch. Organ grinders earned between £2 and £3 but had to pay 15 shillings (75p) to rent the organ.

I now move on to another kind of street entertainment altogether – the pavement artist – they also have a long history, and to some extent they too were a product of technological progress. They started to appear in the streets from the 17th Century when cities began to have flat smooth pavements. An 1829 drawing by George

¹ **violoncello** means a large stringed instrument of the violin family, but smaller than the cello

² The **hurdy gurdy**, known in France as the vielle a roue or vielle for short, is an ancient instrument which is undergoing a modern renaissance in Europe and America.

Cruickshank (the caricaturist and book illustrator) was one of the earliest published images of a pavement artist or “Screever” as they were known – probably derived from the Latin word “Scribere” meaning to write. The term “screever” was used in Disney’s film “Mary Poppins” in 1964 to describe Bert as a pavement artist.

Early “screevers” seem to have focussed on writing slogans – appeals for money – religious quotations and warnings, the text surrounded by elaborate borders. They then moved on to creating pictures. Their medium was chalk and various colours. In Victorian times groups of screevers worked at night – drawing by candle light. From the 1880’s the introduction of street lamps – especially on the Thames Embankment made it a haven for night artists. Sadly they vanished as a result of the blackout in the First World War.

The zenith of the pavement artist appears to have been just before the First World War. The 1911 census contains large numbers of people who described themselves as “pavement artists”. Sadly the officials of the day who compiled the statistics from the Census failed to distinguish between pavement artists and other types of painters so consequently it is not possible to know exactly how many there were, though one London newspaper estimated that there were around 400 in London alone and of course pavement artists operated in most of the cities in Britain. The life of a pavement artist was at tough one. They depended on the weather as much as the generosity of the passers-by.

George Orwell befriended one such artist called “Bozo” and this was a tragic story. He started when a boy, as an apprentice house painter, he moved to Paris to paint where he met a young lady and became engaged. His fiancée was killed in an accident and then Bozo was disabled as a result of a fall from scaffolding. He returned to London and made a living by drawing political cartoons. He could make as much as £3 on a good weekend, averaging £1 a week – fine during the summer months, but half starved in winter. He lived on the streets as well as drawing on them.

Gradually during the 20th Century Street entertainers disappeared from our towns and cities – many became circus performers or variety acts in theatres – especially as sea-side establishments. Seaside holidays became fashionable as a result of factory holidays, “wakes weeks”. Seaside towns needed to cater for the holiday makers – hence the pier theatres.

Two world wars naturally were the major cause of the disappearance of entertaining in the streets – the call up of the male population and the bombing; plus the need for women to come to the workplace.

After the Second World War Billy Butlin saw a niche in the market – a brain wave – the buying of army camps – surplus to use and turning them into holiday camps.

Holiday camps needed armies of staff as well as cooks, bar-tenders, electricians, office staff, musicians, singers, dancers, magicians, comedians et al. Other entrepreneurs followed suit. Holiday camps flourished for many years and eventually became more sophisticated venues – “Warners Holidays” cruises - entertainers never had it so good. Many well known entertainers that became household names on television started their careers in a holiday camp.

Pavement artists have given way to illicit graffiti – or so it appeared! So - what next?

Graffiti on the walls of buildings, sides of railway bridges, in tunnels and city centre lavatories - and building sites grew to large proportions and caused offence to the general public – much as the litter on our streets offends. Perpetrators could find themselves confronted the arm of the law! The graffiti could not always be classed as “artistic” and did little to enhance the surroundings and town centres and nor did the choice of the accompanying comments!



Figure 1 Graffiti or Street Art?

But changes were afoot – those gable ends and brick walls began to be painted with more style – and we know of one artist, who has become a household name and his work is worth rather more than the cost of his paint, once the elusive “Banksy”.

Banksy's most famous street art piece: Balloon Girl. This graffiti is located in London and represents the lost parts of life and society. But the balloon itself is a symbol of hope.

Earlier this month an auction took place in London – screen prints of some of Banksy's work were to be sold – bids were expected to be between £20,000 and £30,000!!!



Figure 2 Balloon Girl

Click on this link to see local Street Art created during the current pandemic:
[Nuneaton art teacher creates visual gallery in his town - BBC News](#)

Graffiti is now known as “Street Art”, one only has to visit the Custard Factory in Digbeth – Birmingham, to see many examples of very creative and artistic wall paintings, created by some of the leading street artists in the country.

Actual “pavement” artistry has also made a comeback. In Trafalgar Square, and so, I understand, pedestrian shopping streets and squares in Birmingham and no doubt, plenty more in towns and cities - artists produce their works – using



Figure 3 Street Artist outside National Gallery

waterproof chinks. I personally have not seen any of these city centre works of art – but have been told on good authority that they are very impressive.

Yet another form of “Street Art” is ‘Sand Sculpture’ – exhibitions and competitions of Sand Sculpture can be marvelled over. Personally I have only seen these on the television; and was truly amazed at what I saw. One of the members of the group, told me of a ‘sand artist’ in Birmingham who lays down a square of material and with a bag of sand – fashions a sculpture, usually a lying dog –before your very eyes.



Figure 4 Beach - Sand Sculpture



Figure 5 Street Artist - Sand Sculpture - Birmingham

However “tableau vivant”³ sprang back to life in the 1980’s – possibly based on something from long ago called a “Singing Sculpture” – this form of street entertainment has been popular on the continent for very many years. Nowadays



Figure 7 Poser Thames Embankment - London

one can hardly walk along the Thames Embankment or through Trafalgar Square without seeing a horde of young men and women covered in silver metallic powder standing on milk crates – striking poses! – *is he breathing; is he real? Is it a cardboard cut out?* Not just in London – seaside resorts and other large cities boast their “posers”.



Figure 6 Poser Thames Embankment - London

I now include some personal recollections of this form of entertainment.

As a small girl – my Dad took me to the Quayside in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. All day on Sunday there was all manner of entertainers: Fire eaters; Sword swallows; the Strongman – freeing himself from chains; Magicians; food and drink stalls; ice cream; noise, crowds with all the oohs and aahs.

I recall going into the city centre with my Grandma to the market and hearing singing and music from the banjo’s, violins, and accordions – the players begging for coppers. I recall a shabby lady with a large tray, a strap around her neck – on the tray were tumbling beans – as she tipped the tray the beans tumbled over and over – selling at 2 for a penny (1d).

Back in the 70’s one of my sons played his trombone in the London Underground. He was a student at the Royal College of Music. Practising trombone can be rather annoying for neighbours. Home practice was scheduled before 6:00 pm, so some practice was done in the London underground. I was led to believe that Peter only practiced and did not accept any remuneration – pity he may have become a millionaire instead of a struggling musician. Many professional singers and musicians use Covent Garden as an ideal venue to practise, entertaining while the tourists enjoy a coffee and a snack.

³ A silent and motionless group of people arranged to represent a scene or incident.

Again in Covent Garden, there are other street entertainers to be seen, drawing the crowds around them as they 'do their magic' their entertainment.

I draw my piece to a close with a mention of "*The Pop Concert*"; "*The Hay-on-Wye festival*"; "*The Edinburgh Festival*"; and it is here that many entertainers hope to be discovered – they seek any likely venue, pubs; a room above a shop; church hall; or a spot in a little theatre or out in the open air. Here hopefuls are testing the water, eager to share their talent to make us laugh; to touch our emotions; to encourage us to clap.

In the history of mankind there are some things that never change.

Footnote: *"I am hoping that this short offering will engender much discussion and reminisces – re Street Entertainment in all its forms.
I am also informed on good authority "Street Art", and entertainment thrives in Europe and I hazard a guess – across many continents"*