Jesters – Forgotten Stories of North East Comedy

Episode One: Leonard Barras, a Shipyard Surrealist (with Gavin Webster)

GW: Gavin Webster

MR: Max Roberts

PM: Peter Mortimer

MUSIC: Theme by Gavin Webster and Sammy Dobson

GW: My name is Gavin Webster, I’m a stand-up comedian from Tyneside, the same part of the world that the man I’m going to talk to you about was from, Leonard Barras.

‘In a Name,’ a piece from the ‘Through My Hat’ column, read by Sammy Dobson

Councillor Mrs Wallop, Mayor of High Loathsome, yesterday addressed a meeting on the denationalisation of foreign nationals for want of something worse. Opening with the words, “This contentious wheel has come full cycle…”

She was interrupted by five men who rose giving the names of Weel, Hazz, Thiss, Kumm and Fooll-Seickel. “Surely you have forgotten to bring Mr Kontenshuss,” she enquired sarcastically. “I am Sam Kontenshuss” another man then shouted, “and I would have you know that I came here without prior arrangement.”

A clerical gentleman then stepped forward and said “I can vouch for that for I am Prior Arrangement - but I must add that this is ridiculous,” whereupon three men jumped up in the front row.

“I suppose you lot are the Ridiculous family?” asked Mrs Wallop.

“Not at all!” shouted the trio. “We are the Farcical Brothers from Bedlington. Can you work us in to your next sentence, missus?”

GW: Leonard Barras was actually from Wallsend not that that makes much of a difference, after all Wordsworth was from Cockermouth, Ted Hughes from Mytholmroyd West Yorkshire, Geri Halliwell from Watford. What I’m saying is we all come from a place don’t we?

Wallsend, the well-known shipbuilding town just east of Newcastle, isn’t in all fairness celebrated for its contribution to the high end of literature, poetry or even art, however that statement could be interpreted as a bit sweeping and snobby on my part as it’s produced bassist, songwriter, and frontman of The Police, the one and only Gordon Sumner or Sting as he’s better known worldwide. Or on a local level Mike Neville, the North East’s very own Ron Burgundy, a local news anchor-man, broadcasting legend and purveyor of funny Geordie craic and observations of 20th century Geordie customs with George House in the Larn Yersel Geordie shows that were big in the 1970s. You get the idea.

You could also state that great art has been produced on many a footballing arena round the world by the alumina of The Wallsend Boys Club, where many a ball playing, dribbling genius or goal scoring diamond or clogger was unearthed by the inspirational coaches of the youth club on Station Road.

What makes Leonard Barras distinctly Wallsend though is the fact that all the flights of fancy, all the ludicrous stories, the hatstand characters, the outlandish fictional clubs and societies and the by the by geographical locations between the lovely bits of prose take place in the Wallsend area.

Yes, other places are namechecked but it’s Wallsend and its suburbs be they Willington, Howdon, the Gut, the Ropeworks, the pit head or many more specific landmarks that are the constant in the fantastically written, deft and literal surreal short stories by Barras himself. You get the ludicrous other side of the net curtains in Wallsend in Barras’s stories, a place that has a sort of working-class pomp and circumstance on the outside.

Here is former artistic director of the Live Theatre and friend of Leonard, Max Roberts.

MR: Every day he would travel to Swan Hunter’s shipyard, and he’d work in the drawing office. Every day he’d come out of the shipyards, and he’d go home, and he’d write plays and he’d write stories and he’d write poems. He was a prolific writer, there was not a day that would go by when he didn’t write something. Even if it was an article for The Journal, The Chronicle or The Guardian.

‘Nothing Like Flute Practice,’ from ‘Up the Tyne in a Flummox’, read by Sammy Dobson

‘Well, if you ask me…’ is a preface used by people like Albert Fairhurst who are seldom asked anything, because they are going to tell you anyway.

Albert Fairhurst was a jobbing printer who was always right. His wife Norma, who longed for a life beyond the front door, where she had heard there was unbridled hedonism, had never wholly loved him, or jobbing printing, but was one of eight sisters and had married him with a headache.

For quite some time she took his assertions for honest forthrightness, and was rather fond of his ginger hair, but after ten years she realised that she was finishing fewer sentences than she had even at home. It was twelve and a half years, be it said, before forbearance expired.

Their budgie was at first a joy to her and she taught it to recite the words of William Blake, backwards. Before long, however, Fairhurst was interrupting it when it was halfway through ‘Wild southern the in me bore mother my,’ with shouts of, ‘Well if you ask me…’ and it developed a psychological blockage and retreated into the corner of its cage, hiding under its wing.

GW: A great piece from a very funny short story called ‘Nothing Like Flute Practice’ from ‘Up The Tyne In A Flummox’ from 1987.

Leonard Barras was born on February 13th 1922, the youngest of four brothers, he grew up in the 1920s and 30s in a very, shall we say austere North East, a place that was looking like it was in decline due to its over reliance on coal, a place that didn’t really get quids in with the bourgeoning motor industry, film industry or even small factory, mass component industry that was serving other parts of the country in the years after the Great War.

Newcastle, Sunderland and Teesside were relying on ships, steel, coal and heavy industry, these were the jobs that defined an area, but they were struggling under the strain of the first bout of globalisation and a dollar collapsing that put many people out of work at that time.

Leonard himself of course being of the perfect age was called up for the Second World War but bad eyesight saved him from national service. Instead, he went to work as a clerk for Swan Hunter’s the powerhouse shipyard based of course in Wallsend. He was a clerk and by the time he retired forty-five years later he was chief clerk.

However, it was after the war, the immediate post war years when places like Tyneside began to like itself properly and celebrate its own culture, its own foibles, what made it great and its own comical shortcomings. This is where Leonard got his break, firstly by writing on the North East’s very own radio comedy and satire show Wot Cheor Geordie and by having a regular column in the Sunday Sun, the North East’s very own Sunday newspaper. It was a column called ‘Through My Hat’ that began in 1949. We heard the wonderful ‘In A Name’ at the beginning of this podcast, here’s another outlandishly wonderful piece called ‘I Should Know’ from the ‘Through My Hat’ column.

‘I Should Know,’ from ‘Through My Hat’ read by Sammy Dobson

My remarks on Austerlitz have prompted an ill meaning man to ask me what I know about the Wars of the Roses, dropping blots on both sides of the paper. This covers an important bit of history, like Napoleon’s underpants, which you may recall, I last wrote about under my maiden name, Lord Macauley.

What? Get started? All right. Some of the chief battles of the Wars of the Roses were Blore Heath, St Albans (with interruptions for bad light), Bosworth Field and Mortimer’s Cross. It was at Mortimer’s Cross that Owen Tudor was routed with great carnage. Riding away afterwards on his riddled horse, the demented Earl of March could utter nothing but “Mortimer’s Cross!”

“So’s your horse I should think!” riposted the Earl of Warwick. Later, at Barnet, although there was only small carnage, the Earl of Warwick met his desserts. These things catch you up.

I might make these notes more worthwhile by mentioning something of local interest. Then again, I might not. In any case why should I? Oh, well. Two of the Roses battles were fought at Hedgley Moor and Hexham Northumberland respectively.

If you visit these scenes, you will find an old man, claiming to have fought in both battles, who will gladly show you over the field for two shillings a head. For an extra sixpence, he will show you his wound, if you’re a lady. What with this and my paper round I don’t do so badly.

PM: My name’s Peter Mortimer and I’m a writer and editor of Iron Press in the North East, and we published several of Len’s books over the years. I first met Leonard Barras when I answered the door on a rainy Tuesday afternoon, and he was standing there with rain dripping off his nose asking if we’d be interested in doing one of his books and I invited him in and I sat him down. As I talked to him, I thought “he looks like a grade two wages clerk” but the more I talked to him and the more I read his stuff, I thought he’s like a comic anarchist, he has an imagination unlike anybody I’d ever known. I defy anyone to read him more than about two minutes and not be collapsing with mirth. He was a rare Geordie surrealist, I’d say. He didn’t seek publicity; he wasn’t at all publicity seeking. He never did any publicity unless we really pushed him towards it. Every one of his books that we published, he always bought 30 copies and when he died, they found them all under his bed.

GW: Yes, there has been comparisons with JB Morton or Beachcomber the critic-cum-diarist-cum reviewer in the Daily Express and Flann O Brien, another journalist and of course novelist, who the pretentious set regard as the first ever post-modernist writer.

It strikes me though that Leonard, even though unfortunately I never knew him, would’ve laughed at all this, as his self-deprecating humour wouldn’t have allowed himself to be taken so seriously. He was someone that I feel I can identify with, you know just keep writing more stuff and let the funny routines, the monologues, the short stories, ridiculous poems, and plays do the talking. Not who you think you are or who other people think you are.

The plays were celebrated, well thought of, and given premieres by Alan Ayckbourn no less at Scarborough. ‘A Little Stiff Built Chap’ in 1969 was followed in 1970 by ‘The Shy Gasman.’ Barras, alongside other esteemed writers of the time, Alex Glasgow and Henry Livings, wrote for the award-winning Northern Drifts programme for BBC Radio and I’d say probably brought a much needed slice of surreal humour to the rather harrowing kitchen sink era of Northern writings at that time and a signal for the North East to go forth and be silly. Rather like many of Michael Palin’s Ripping Yarns programmes that were set in fictional Northern towns and Les Dawson’s wonderful stories of Northerners with ridiculous names alongside the delightful nonsensical-ness of sitcoms like Oh No It’s Selwyn Froggart right through to Vic Reeves and Bob Mortimer and their great body of work, it all has a base in the wonderful meanderings of Leonard Barras.

MR: He wrote me this play called Come Snow, Come Blow. Robson Green, who’d been in The Long Line was working for the company at that time. Robson knew Leonard Barras because Robson was an apprentice draughtsman at Swan Hunter’s. When Leonard walked into the room he said “Oh, you used to work at Swan’s in the shipyards, you were that old gadgie that was in charge of everybody.” Apparently, he didn’t say a word, Leonard, he didn’t say boo to a goose, because he was a very shy man. When Robson read these words, he just could not believe them, and he had a natural affinity for them. So, in this particular play called Come Snow, Come Blow, he played a character called Victor Ruddy, who lived with his brother Ivan Ruddy in this little house in Wallsend. This absurdist play is full of some of the funniest passages and not to everyone’s cups of tea. If I put a play on by Tom Hadaway or Alan Plater or Cecil Taylor, the audiences would flock. If you put a play on by Leonard Barras, a lot of people would come and see it, but it wouldn’t be in anyway as popular as Cecil or Tom or Alan.

‘Public Exposures,’ from ‘Up the Tyne in a Flummox,’ read by Sammy Dobson.

Herbert Mangle, the neo-Wordsworthian poet, used to claim that councillor Mrs Thelma Dutt vied with the pit heap as Wallsend’s most noblest landmark. He was violently in love with her for three weeks, and one night was reading to her *His Lines Written To A Vast Widow* , when she perched on his knee and displaced a cartilage, rendering him unfit to keep goal for Wallsend Amnesia football team.

My Uncle Hal, Marxist team manager, upbraided this familiar Marxist surrender to the flesh and called on the Sunday School superintendent instead for the ‘derby’ match against Percy Main Static. The superintendent pointed out that he had a sprained thumb, sustained in striking the lectern during a sermon entitled ‘Guard Thine Honour’. Nevertheless, he acknowledged that he smelt the battle far off and was willing to say among the trumpets, ha ha.

“That’s all right then,” said Uncle Hal.

He would have preferred to hand the goalkeeper’s jersey to Seppy Elphinstook, the celibate barber, who, because of his knock knees, seldom let a ball between his legs, but Elphinstook had lapsed into one of his misogynist spells, sitting in the front room of his fire, with his big toe sticking out of his sock, hating women.

PM: I think when Len told me about his ‘Through My Hat’ column, in the Sunday Sun in the 1950s, which was then a very different paper than it is now. I’d never heard of them and I said, “have you still got them?” and he’d still got yellowing cuttings in his scrapbook and he showed me them and I thought “this is extraordinary, 1950s, I can’t imagine anybody writing it in the 1950s.”

It was stuffed with characters like Herbert Mangle, the Wallsend poet. All sorts of extraordinary characters that came straight out of his head. I was knocked out by it and I said “we want to do a book,” so we did a book you know, called ‘Through My Hat.’

He wouldn’t have his photo taken. It took me ages to persuade him to have his photo taken, he finally came round, sat in my living room and he wore his hat pulled down over his face and I put a variety of dummies round him and surrounded him with clutter, so you wouldn’t know who he was. That’s what he wanted; he didn’t want anyone to know who he was in a way. He would never have a conventional photo.

GW: Ah his Marxist Uncle Hal who frequently commented on the evils of capitalism, Jas Hunkers the family butcher and Royalist, of course who could forget Herbert Mangle the Wallsend poet or Seppy Elphinstook the misogynist barber. All these characters, mainly men because Tyneside was and still is to an extent a very patriarchal society where blokes would organise stuff to death.

People from the North East are great at committees and councils and stuff about organising other stuff, it’s where a lot of our humour comes from. Club committees, pigeon racing, leek shows, whippets, it all needs very fastidious men running them and it’s clear that this was a goldmine for Leonard.

MR: His narratives at times were non-linear and there wasn’t massive kind of plot twists and there were often sequences which were discursions on things that he was interested in like philosophy, poetry, or the work of William Blake, he was quite obsessed with George Bernard Shaw, so there would be Shavian references all the way through it.

GW: Aye he still wasn’t finished. For a man that started in a very different Tyneside, a world where most of the humour and entertainers and even playwrights of that time could never have even begun to entertain crowds of the 21st century, he was still writing interesting stuff.

I mean I don’t think it’s out of order to say that his peers in the late 40s writing sketches for Wot Cheor Geordie had they still been alive couldn’t even have fathomed out a millennial let alone tried to entertain them. A post-modern audience would have seen their writing as tedious and risible, audiences that had seen I don’t know Star Wars, The Young Ones, Dr Strangelove, A Clockwork Orange, all this kind of stuff, but Leonard Barras’s writing still appeared to be fresh and funny and had a high hit rate gag wise where every sentence is laced with a hidden short joke or two before getting to the main punchline.

MR: We did his last play when he was ill, it was shortly before he died, it was just a half hour play called The Purple Pullover. Sort of one o’clock in North Tyneside Libraries, about ten libraries and he said, “there’s no way I can come and see it, I’m too ill.” I said, “you’re bloody coming, I’m coming to get you and I’m going to drive you there and sit you in the front row and you’re going to watch it.” And we presented him with a pullover afterwards. The pullover was in the play. So that was great, but he didn’t last much longer after that, I don’t know exact, but he didn’t last long, but I thought “he’s got to see his play, he’s got to see his last play.”

PM: He was a one off, he definitely was a one-off and I think he suffered because of this. He was also such a shy man, he wasn’t pushy at all, he never pushed his own work. I had to drag stuff out of him. I challenged him to write a novel, he said no, but he did then, The Chocolate Cream Society, one of the main characters is a talking horse, which is a riot really. It’s a riot, half the time I have no idea what’s going on, it’s a riot.

GW: Leonard Barras died on January 20th, 2008. Alas poor Barras, I didn’t actually know you well, in fact I didn’t know the man at all. I could have. Our lives overlapped over nearly 40 years yet sadly, as now a great fan of his work, I never got to meet the man behind all those wonderful surreal tales that jump off the page and make you laugh out loud and take you to his eccentric world.

However, in the fleeting nature of human life, I, a stand-up comedian who likes to play it left field got alerted to his work by enthusiasts, by fans of the plays and the short stories, by people who said, you would love this stuff, and they were right.

He may have fallen into obscurity, which is quite funny really isn’t it? It’s rather like the pathos of the many characters he wrote, yes he didn’t get the recognition, the publicity or even capture the imagination of far less talented writers but that doesn’t alter the ink on the page, the unique-ness, the silliness yet paradoxically gentle sardonic nature of the work.

The greatest comedy writer the North East has ever produced? Who knows? As long as people are there to quote him, to wax lyrical of Arbuthnot Wotherfoot or Herbert Mangle, there’ll always be a Leonard Barras.

Let’s end with a poem from Barras, written sometime in the 50s for the ‘Through My Hat’ column entitled ‘Passion By’

‘Passion By’ read by Sammy Dobson

Enormous Ida took my eye,

Beside a bus one starry night:

I did but see her passing by –

The bus was quite obscured from sight

GW: This was an episode of Jesters – The Forgotten Stories of North East Comedy.

Leonard Barras, a Shipyard Surrealist was written and narrated by me, Gavin Webster, with contributions from Peter Mortimer and Max Roberts.

The Leonard Barras material was given kind permission to be performed by Iron Press Publishing.

The reader of the material was Sammy Dobson.

The music was written by me Gavin Webster and Sammy Dobson.

This has been a Felt Nowt production, in association with Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums.