

THE BRITISH MUSEUM: 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF CHARITY SHOW

HOW IT HAPPENED

I had arrived in London from Trinidad in 1962; and while the years from 1962 to 1969 had been tumultuous, the period from August 1969 to August 1970 had been no less so. By 1970, I'd already turned a few pages, so to speak, but my quest for Stardom as a singer and Actor (having sung in London pubs and attended Drama School) became less urgent. Not only had I changed jobs, got married and moved house with a mortgage to pay, I also became a father! Now instead of travelling to work from Holloway Road to the Senate House Library in Central London, living in Hackney, I took a bus to the British Museum. Throughout these years, one thing that did not change was my ever-growing ambition to be a writer. Already, I'd written several Short Stories; and after seeing and being in the British Museum's Round Reading Room, my resolve to write in a more disciplined way was strengthened. In effect, I'd left one distinguished library for another, a move from the University of London's Senate House Library of some 800,000 books to the estimated eight million-strong British Museum Library Collection. Now each day that I spent in the famous Room was a novel experience; an eye-opener which provided the all-important personal, mental space that I needed. Increasingly, as a staff member, I exercised my legitimate right to be in the Room as often as I could, which included lunch-breaks. It was the most seductive, thought-provoking environment that I'd ever known.

Soon, everything that I'd read and did there took on new meaning. Thus I'd joined the Readers' fraternity, comprising of British and International Scholars, researchers, artists and writers. The effect upon me was immediate: I was imbued with instantaneous peace and solitude that were so integral to intellectual rigour. The high-backed, upholstered blue leather chairs and ample desk space, were comfortable and comforting.

Architecturally, the curvature gave the Round Room a pleasing symmetry; its three-tiered wall to wall shelves of books from ground level to the Second Floor were bathed in daylight that streamed through the high glass ceiling, thus enhancing the beauty of the entire space, which could be seen, admired and enjoyed from every Seat.

As days passed, with due diligence, I applied myself to my employment as a Library Assistant which was straight-forward enough. I realised that I could cope with this work relatively easily; that it allowed me some flexibility for educational improvement, which helped me to become more effective in my job; and increasingly, I saw the relationship between work, study and writing as a positive combination. Overall, it was the best way forward; a hard but necessary road to follow.

Sitting among the Readers, the majority of whom were older, distinguished-looking men, as well as and a few women, I wondered what subjects of study engaged them, and how priceless their works were; thoughts that powerfully reminded me of my relative lack of knowledge, the very driving force of my ambition. To write, one has to read! And as daily reading became integral to my very existence, while my vocabulary expanded, the need to WRITE became a natural extension of myself and thus of my working day. Put simply,

writing meant learning!

I considered the fact that acquiring academic knowledge (educational qualifications) was one thing, but to write meaningful words that others would like to read was quite another! Writing Short Stories prior to coming to the British Museum Library, was what I did; and was still doing so. My passion gained added impetus when I reminded myself that some of the most famous scholars and writers in the English language had sat, read and written down their thoughts to fulfil **their own ambitions in that very Room**. The iconic names that I came to know were William Thackeray, Charles Dickens, Thomas Carlyle, Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw and Karl Marx, among others.

Against this background, one writing project that had engaged me deeply at this time was my first attempt at a novel entitled "Carnival in Trinidad." Steeped in this literary work, my "bookishness" caught the attention of some of my work colleagues, a few of whom had noticed my interest and daily presence in the Round Reading Room. One of them, was a man named Malcolm Campbell; another, was an older man named Tom Pocock. Just a few days after I'd started work in the British Museum, Pocock had asked me to fill-in a Form to join the "Union."

"A Union?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "Here is a Form."

I took the Form, but was puzzled, unsure what to make of it. Mild-mannered and refreshingly friendly, Pocock had explained the "benefits" in such a way that I saw no reason why I should not fill-in the Form. Given the prospect of becoming a member of a Trade Union – in this case, the Civil Service Union of Great Britain – almost at once, my thoughts strayed back to my employment in the Senate House Library, where, in all the Promotion-less seven years of employment there, I was never approached to become involved in anything to do with "job-protection," "job-enhancement or Workers' Rights." Employment in the Senate House was a dead-end, where it was every man for himself. So joining the CSU now seemed like some sort of improvement; intuitively, the right thing to do!

A few weeks later, both Campbell and Pocock asked me to do something else: "Would you like to join the Branch Committee? they asked. Known as Branch 849, it represented a range of grades that formed the majority of Library staff in the British Museum. Soon, a vacancy for the Secretaryship of the Branch appeared; and thus another higher Post beckoned for which I was nominated by Chairman Campbell. Then, at the Annual General Meeting, the most extraordinary thing happened: **I was duly Elected as Branch Secretary; a post which meant representing hundreds of working men and women in the British Museum, and, by extension, in the United Kingdom-wide Civil Service Union.** This unanimous vote was historic: a **WATERSHED**. It was the **MOMENT** that **changed my life profoundly, and has entered British Museum history for ever.** That Election catapulted me to becoming the **FIRST Black "Shop Steward;"** a working class leader in the British Museum (and I think in any major British national Institution!) at a time of rampant Race, Colour and Sex discrimination, when Black and Asian voices at workplaces were very few indeed.

Certainly, the Election of "Foreigners," especially people of colour in positions of leadership in important national British institutions (like the British Museum) was almost impossible to

imagine. Even more significant was the fact that the vast majority, over 90% of the Branch Membership was White working class, among whom “Racist beliefs” were, at times, expressed in no uncertain terms. But, overall, I was deeply touched by the members’ “Vote of Confidence” in me; an open, very rare public showing which I respected enormously, and, at once, fully embraced. Thus my job as Library Assistant coalesced with my earlier Drama Training and acting, at every turn, on behalf of the Diverse, but overwhelmingly White-English Membership. Their faith in me was renewed with my re-election. Thus, I initiated and vowed to press on with the historic, unrelenting campaign for an Equal Opportunities Policy in the British Museum! **THIS INITIATIVE and years of insistent calls for policy improvements, bore fruit in later years when the British Museum employed its FIRST Black African Curator; as well as the First Black woman to the Museum’s Board of Trustees. Diversity in deed was my mantra!**

Thus “Diversity” was upfront; integral to what I did each day in the British Museum. With no precedents, through my own and the Committee’s efforts, of necessity, I did more. In effect, my life was fuller; busier. The challenges were stark and daunting as I came to understand that certain concepts and expressions: “Collective bargaining,” “Industrial Relations and trade unionism,” were deeply-embedded aspects of life that were integral to British society; especially among the Working Classes. So wily-nily I incorporated a new vocabulary (akin to a new language!) which arose from the representations that I made. Moreover, a quasi- Civil Service organisations like the Whitley Council was instituted. In effect, it was *the* Forum for local Industrial Relations negotiations between the Unions and the British Museum Management, which predictably, as I was finding out, struggled to get past paying lip-service to ‘staff representations’ and the ideals of “good Management-Staff relations.”

The fact that I could not (did not) find ANY VALID reason why I should not do my DUTY for, and on behalf of, my fellow-workers, was reason enough to fully engage with the increasingly EXTRAORDINARY ROLE of being Secretary of Branch 849 in the British Museum. Trade Unions and the highly-respected Trade Union Congress, had altogether undoubted bargaining power; and thus a major input (as did the Confederation of British Industry) in determining Government National Incomes Policy. Therefore, *all* workers, whether or not they were members of the CSU stood to benefit from “Union representation.” Plunged into the maelstrom of this local-national situation, I began to realize the enormity of what I was tasked to do in the British Museum as the representative of an estimated 3,000 employees (of various grades), which posed a huge challenge that would, time and again, test me to the limit: Public speaking and writing commitments increased. But, as with everything that I’d done so far, I was ever-ready and willing as Staff Organiser to do my best to foster improvements, which necessarily meant pushing the boundaries!

In the revolutionary years of the ’70s the British Museum and Bloomsbury were an extraordinary hub of intellectual life; an area in London where publishers, scholars, novelists, poets and artists were to be seen and heard. Radical activists debated the earlier

1968 “Student Uprisings” and the “Way forward” for the “Proletariat,” (working classes) while workers around the world were encouraged by struggles for decolonisation within the British Empire.

At the British Museum, my time and energy were fixed on the demands of my deepening commitment to the pressing task of improving the lot of the poorly-paid.

As their representative, I took my job very seriously indeed. In fact, nothing that I’d done hitherto was more instructive and meaningful for even more now I understood what it really meant to be so thoroughly engaged with the “University of Hard Knocks.” Simultaneously, I felt the need to gain as much knowledge as possible about local issues, as well as making connections between National/International affairs. Thus I was able to reflect upon my Colonial heritage to which I brought a clearer understanding of the HISTORIC ROLE that I was playing as an AGENT FOR CHANGE. “**Historic Moment**” was an expression much used among Socialists and trade Unionists at the time. And, as I realised, history was neither “Bunk” (as one very wealthy American Businessman) had described the subject) nor something in the past. For me, and the hundreds whom I represented, it had real meaning for me **on the ground** in the British Museum and Bloomsbury. Thus, in all that I’d been immersed, in so far, I had become an integral part of a palpable movement that had emerged, which a local Bookshop Manager, an astute Rare Book dealer called: “The Radicalisation of Bloomsbury.”

At the time, the TUC General Secretary, Len Murray, was a household name; and low-paid workers and their representatives, hung on Murray’s words when he spoke especially of Pay. Alas, unlike Mr Murray, not all Union representatives were as effective as they could, and should, have been: Whatever my predecessor, Mr Pocock, felt about his time as Secretary at the British Museum, it was abundantly clear to me that as a workers’ representative, he’d performed his duties not only at a leisurely pace, but also primarily because he used the Secretaryship as a status symbol! Alas, the changing times continued to change and Mr Pocock’s style leadership became anachronistic. With heightened awareness of time and place, in turn, I decided to play my leader’s role VERY differently! I could not do otherwise for I was in the heart of the former British Empire; and **where could be more evocative of that Empire than the British Museum** with its great literary, artistic and archaeological heritage; an Emporium of world treasures.

Things had indeed changed in the British Museum for I, a former “Colonial,” was now, not simply a part of British society, but for better or worse, a leading player! As a “progressive thinking” person (who had initiated, personified and pressed for Equal Opportunities) I socialised with the Socialists, but never took membership of theirs or any others’ Political Party. Nonetheless, increasingly, as if borne on the crest of a wave, I was caught up in the spirit of the “Radicalisation of Bloomsbury” as I attended meetings with workers and students. By so doing, I was extremely mindful that unlike my predecessor, I should maintain a *fresh* approach as Organiser, adapting to circumstances, as well as adopting a determined, business-like attitude. In this respect, soon after my Election as Secretary, I did something that was quite revolutionary: I contacted the British Museum’s Personnel Officer and *booked* the Museum’s New Lecture Theatre as the venue for my FIRST Branch Meeting.

Why this dramatic change? Because I wanted to STAGE my FIRST Branch Meeting; to promote it as an important occasion, heralding a NEW beginning! I wanted the hitherto inert "Membership" to realise that there had indeed been a real change in leadership. So given my earlier singing and dramatic training, the New Lecture Theatre, I thought, was the ideal setting for staff meetings; an intimate space located in the Assyrian Basement, just off to the left of the magnificent Egyptian Gallery. I could not have wished for a grander environment, which added, not only to my sense of purpose, but also to my fast developing interest in engendering and hopefully establishing *more* respectful and thus effective relations between Management and Staff.

I did not see myself as a "revolutionary," I was not willing to put any constraints upon myself. On the contrary, I felt the need to learn; and buckled down to the job in hand. So using the New lecture Theatre Stage to spotlight the essence of what were, and should be, good Management-Staff relations, as my Leadership style evolved and as I developed personally, I was imbued with the extraordinary Spiritual-Intellectual perspective that gradually transformed me into an even more uncompromising, DEDICATED SERVANT!! As a consequence, Branch 849's profile was raised to an unprecedented level nationally in the CSU; and now it had become abundantly clear that I had arrived at an interesting juncture in life's journey, namely: **That in London, I was the right man, in the right place, at the right time!** As my popularity grew, each day of my representations in the British Museum I exploited every opportunity, harnessing the potential of all concerned.

AN EXTRAORDINARY LEADER AT THE BRITISH MUSEUM

Early in 1972, my ever lively imagination took flight as I wondered how best I might be able to serve staff in the New Year. By now, I realised that my conspicuous, long-haired presence at meetings, at various levels, took some getting used to; especially when I met Senior Museum figures in the Board Room!

Of significance too, and well-worth remembering, is the fact that the vast majority of CSU members being White working class people, so my Leadership position was most unusual; and for some who were prejudiced, there was a huge amount that I had to prove!

Given the stark realities of Racism in Britain, relations between White, Black and Asian workers were fraught with problems. Put simply, I was never backward in coming forward, as each day, I was sharply reminded of being at the **cutting edge of British Race Relations**. Thoroughly immersed in relentless workplace struggles, I continued as a Dedicated Servant of staff. Only the best representation is what I offered; and I needed all the knowledge and co-operation to facilitate this! And embroiled in daily struggles, I learned fast and gained confidence as a persuasive Speaker. Thus, my Drama Training and Singing lessons had come in handy, I thought.

By now, I had to come to terms with the fact that I'd been, and was now, for better or worse, a Public figure; and thus open to intense public scrutiny. Alas, PRIVACY was not for me. I recognised a growing gregariousness in me which I used to relentlessly generate a

day-to-day sense of Solidarity among the sometimes fractious Membership. Thus now I reflected that after a cautious but positive start, in my relationship with staff, two years on, both my own confidence and theirs had grown. How strong was that relationship? Is a question which I could not answer with any certainty.

Although I'd been away for ten years, Trinidad remained an ever-present past; and I became more questioning about that country, and was what I did now in England!

MY 'DREAM' INITIATIVE: A CHARITY SHOW IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM

Resonances of the past filled my head. I remember my mother saying that as a sick two year old child, I was "given up" as a hopeless case by two doctors. Ultimately, it was entirely due to her perseverance that I was kept me alive. Now, in 1972, amidst the hustle and bustle at the British Museum, ever-present intermittent thoughts of malnourished children came to mind as I harboured a "dream" which I hoped one day to make a reality. "One day?" But when, I wondered.

Attending to a growing number of workplace issues, occasionally, I thought of my early in England: On what was, my "expensive" Drama School and Singing Lessons; and increasingly since I'd initiated the unheard of practice of **READING ALOUD** the Minutes of monthly Branch meetings from the stage of the New Lecture Theatre. This proved to be a good thing; and so in that cosy, attractive space, I continued to infuse a sense of drama to our individual and collective workplace experience. Moreover, I presented a "public face" which helped to banish my lingering shyness, which was replaced by growing confidence, self-liberating gregariousness and an openness towards others. This double-whammy was opportune for I felt the gains that we, as a group of employees had made, needed to be consolidated, and that would be **central to improving** our lot! Thus, my task as an Elected leader, I reminded myself, was at all times, to propose, discuss and organise.

But while meetings in the British Museum and elsewhere worked well at one level, I believed that **SOMETHING** very **DIFFERENT** was needed; something that would bring people closer together. What I had in mind was not "idle talk" (which, by now, I'd heard a good deal of!) but a matter of undeviating purpose and action. So, with my new-found, confidence and becoming better known, what had been recurrent thoughts of malnourished children **IN THE "Third World,"** which had at first seemed like a fantastic "**DREAM IDEA,**" evolved markedly; and in the summer of 1972, I decided to put it into effect! My goal was to use the stage for another purpose; for something extraordinary in the British Museum; and to do so for a "Good Cause;" a Charity, namely **THE SAVE THE CHILDREN FUND!** Even though for quite a while after I'd embraced this idea it still had a whiff of being far-fetched. But, on balance, I felt, it was *definitely* worth a try!

Through my dealings with a cross-section of British Museum Staff, I'd come to know a number of very talented people; and given my interest in Music and Drama, as the Summer of 1972 progressed and Christmas approached, my gestating thoughts could not be clearer: The next part of my Plan was more specific: It was this: That I should stage a "Concert," or a

“Variety Show, specifically for Charity to be held in the British Museum’s New Lecture Theatre. The goal could not be clearer. But the questions that I faced were: How do I go about this? Where do I begin? Because such a thing had never happened before, my greatest, most immediate problem was HOW to convince the Board of Trustees of the British Museum that what I had in mind was indeed a good, do-able idea! In other words, how do I get the distinguished Director, Sir John Wolfenden, and his top Administrators, to AGREE to such an unusual proposition? As I knew only too well, the iconic, world famous Museum was, at this time, well-known as a “very Conservative and frosty institution;” a central pillar of the British Establishment. Here, in this grandest of London buildings the essence of British traditions were preserved and proudly displayed; and I was, but a mere Colonial! Nonetheless, I’d convinced myself that I was a **Colonial** with a GRAND, noble IDEA! But would it work? I asked myself. And the more I did so, the less remote the possibility for doing the Show for the Charity that I’d chosen seemed: The Save the Children Fund was ideal. Nothing else mattered to me. Why? Because a child’s life (especially a “Coolie” child on Trinidad sugar plantations) was very cheap; and because I understood only too well what deprivation was for the poor children whom I knew in my childhood and schooldays. Having selected this Charity, my next step was to TEST it! So in an exploratory, but fairly confident way, I FIRST VOICED the “IDEA” of a Show, privately to a colleague who showed absolutely no interest. Thereafter, I confided in no one. But time was against me: With speed and great hope, I pressed ahead with the “idea,” sounding out certain potentially key individuals, among whom were two talented members of staff: Geoff and John, the former was a Curator. Both were, I was told, competent guitarists. They were in conversation in a local Bloomsbury hostelry, when I first approached them. “Excuse me,” I said, “I am hoping to stage a Show in the British Museum. The sound of my voice reverberated in the silence that followed. The two young men’s expressions were more or less blank, followed by an amused, questioning smile: “What kind of Show?” Geoff asked. Given that my words were not an idle comment; certainly not a joke, I put it to them that what I envisaged was “A Musical Show for Charity at Christmas!” Though it was the height of Summer, I paused for good effect, before adding: “For the moment, I’m calling it ‘The Ron Ramdin Show.’ ” These last words were another shock to them.

Their derisory smiles were followed by dismissive laughter: “There he goes again!” said John, whose comment was followed by the bearded Geoff, who asked: “And what, will **YOU** do?”

“Sing, of course,” I said casually.

Neither man knew of my appearances as a singer in London pubs and, as a Finalist, in a Talent Contest in Alexandra Palace’s Ballroom.

After my encounter with Geoff and John, I said nothing more to them for several weeks. A few days later, I spoke to another Museum Curator about my proposed “Show.” Each day, since those first moments of open declaration to Geoff and John, being fully committed to the idea, I felt I had to follow through.

In my capacity as Staff Leader, though the Charity Show was now impinging on “Union business,” I decided to air the matter to Members at a Branch Committee, in the hope of

getting approval for my “Show-Business” event.

What would they make of it? I wondered. At first, no Committee Member warmed to the extraordinary proposition. After pressing the matter further and answering several questions, eventually, and crucially, I received the Committee’s general support. I promised to report back; and reflected: Right now, this was all that I really needed. And so, on my newly-acquired Brother typewriter, with great excitement, I formalised what was in my head; my “dream idea,” by taking the momentous, next practical steps to bring about my “Charity Show.”

On the 22 August 1972, I wrote a letter to Sir John Wolfenden, Director of the British Museum:

“Dear Sir,” I wrote, saying that on behalf of the Committee, I “hereby make application for the use of the New Lecture Theatre where we hope to stage a Variety Show for Christmas. This Show will involve members of Staff in the British Museum,” adding “that the proceeds should go to a Charitable Organisation, preferably ‘The Save the Children fund.’ “ Given that ample time would be necessary “to present such a Show,” I requested “permission to use the New Lecture Theatre from 5.00 p m to 9.00 p m on Monday 11th of December, 1972, to stage the Show and also to use it at the same times for Rehearsals on preceding dates, to be decided later. Your consideration in this matter would be very much appreciated. Yours Sincerely,
R.A. Ramdin.”

A day later, I received a reply from Sir John Wolfenden’s Office.

“Dear Mr Ramdin,
I am writing to acknowledge the letter dated 22 August which I have received from you... requesting the use of the Lecture Theatre for the purpose of staging a Variety Show at Christmas. Your request will be considered in the Director’s Office and a further reply will be sent to you as soon as possible.”

I was mightily relieved; very pleased to receive this response. At least it was not a point blank, No! Encouraged, I remained hopeful. Six days later, I received another letter from the Director’s Office. It was from the Deputy Director, Ms Maisie Webb, who wrote:

“Dear Mr Ramdin,
Further to my letter of 23 August, I should be grateful if you would indeed confirm that the proposed Variety Show would be for the benefit of members of the British Museum Staff and that the participants would also be confined to members of the Staff. It would also be helpful if you could let me know how frequently and over what period you propose to hold rehearsals.”

My reply assured Ms Webb that “the proposed Variety Show” would be for the benefit of members of the British Museum Staff; and that the participants would be confined to Staff. I explained the need for six rehearsals, one each week, on Wednesdays “starting from 1st

November through to the 6th December 1972.”

For almost four weeks, I waited, with great expectations, for a response from the Deputy Director. Then, at last, it came:

“Dear Mr Ramdin,

I can now tell you that the Director is prepared to sanction the use of the Lecture Theatre for a performance and also for the rehearsals specified in your letter. This agreement is, of course, subject to availability of the Theatre and on the understanding that the rehearsals will not be held during participants’ working hours. Please make the necessary arrangements for booking the Lecture theatre direct with Mr Randle of the Accommodation Office.”

I was overjoyed to receive this CRUCIAL letter. Excited and encouraged, I immediately began trawling the Museum’s Staff for all the talented people that I could find. In the first few days, the response was disappointing. I was worried, but determined to explore further, I contacted several “prospective performers” from a wide range of Museum Grades for as more time passed, it was important that I get at least a “Provisional List,” as soon as possible!

Gradually, a few potential performers bashfully came forward, while one or two followed. Though pleased, I needed no reminder that the FULL RESPONSIBILITY for the Show was really ENTIRELY mine, and not the Branch Committee’s.

It was a critical time; and for days, I pressed on to win and galvanise all the support that I could get for the Show, which so recently had been but just a “what if” idea in my head. Now, with hard evidence in the form of the British Museum’s Official Letter, and as my “idea” translated into a practical working “Plan of Action,” I moved at a feverish pace. As word spread, a few “sceptics” were won over; and as Christmas 1972 drew nearer, I renamed the teasingly tentative “Ron Ramdin Show” - A CHARITY VARIETY SHOW! Necessarily, as the “Dreamer” and Initiator of the idea, I played many roles, including Producer-Director; Secretary, writing the letters and making the phone-call; talking to Security Staff and arranging meetings. As the Prime Mover, I was invited by the Museum’s Deputy Director, Ms Webb, “to meet with her.” This was vital time which came as no surprise because for such an unusual event, after our exchange of correspondence, it was the logical next step that this top Official would need to meet me face to face. Did a “Mr R. A. Ramdin” really exist? I gladly accepted Ms Webb’s Invitation; and anticipated the meeting which would be a big Test in at least two respects: First my physical appearance; and second, my ability to speak English well, which, would taken together, I thought, consolidate what had been agreed in writing. Furthermore, it would be Ms Webb’s chance to form an overall opinion of me. Thus, in addition to the written word, I felt meeting Ms Webb would matter greatly.

“You know what you are planning to do Mr Ramdin,” she said forthrightly, “has never happened before in the British Museum!” As she spoke, her otherwise round, plump, but pleasant face was gradually transformed; reconfigured with authoritative concern.

“I suspected that this might be so,” I responded, both pleased and awed that what she said

was in fact confirmation of the truth: A FIRST for the British Museum! Indeed it had pioneering element about it; for me and the British Museum authorities, at least. “This is another good reason why WE SHOULD TRY,” I stressed, “and importantly, because the Show would be for the “Charitable Cause” that is The Save the Children Fund.”

After we had talked for a while, Ms Webb reiterated that Sir John Wolfenden approved of what I was doing. So, in effect, the man whose famous “Wolfenden Report,” dealing with the “Red Light” districts and Prostitution in Central London had, as it were, given me the green light!

If eyebrows were raised among a few people when the Charity Show idea in the British Museum was first mentioned, after weeks of much cajoling, now, at last, I had a guaranteed twelve Performers: singers, a pianist, violinists, guitarists, a drummer, a performer of Shakespearean monologue, a drag artist, a comedian and a Pop-Folk Group. My worries were eased markedly; and, at this advanced stage, after the months of private, behind the scenes planning, I decided that the time had come TO GO PUBLIC!

Moving swiftly on, as Producer of the Show, once more, I turned to my typewriter and typed the content of the Charity Show’s Ticket.

“A VARIETY SHOW

presented by

MEMBERS OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM STAFF

THE NEW LECTURE THEATRE

MONDAY 11 DECEMBER 1972

6.30 pm – 8.15 pm Admission: 25p.

IN AID OF THE SAVE THE CHILDREN FUND.”

At last, what had been in my head for so long, was before me, in print.

I approached the British Museum’s Reprographic Department to print 500 Tickets. Then, I wondered: How many tickets would be sold, for something so new in a “stuffy place” like the great British Museum? But, being first and foremost, for Charity and at the price of 25 pence, within two days, all the tickets were sold! Very good news indeed. What was not so good, however, was the first Rehearsal which, to be frank, was a near disaster.

A great deal more work to be done by the Performers, who were, in varying degrees, lacking confidence. Unready to perform, there was also the problem of sorting out the technical problems of Stage Lighting that was required for the Show. In this regard, the British Museum was generous, providing not only new colour lighting equipment (which enhanced

the visual presentation and thus the overall theatricality of the Show) but also Overtime for Security Officers and other staff during rehearsals.

By the third Rehearsal, the number of Performers in attendance had increased; and although some performers still needed to improve, "Practice! Practice! Practice!" I urged everyone, for at this late stage there was very little more that I could realistically do, but believe that all would go well on the night of the Show. By now, there was already so much on my mind that being "worried" was relatively-speaking, a small matter.

On the night of the Show, seated in the Front Row seats were the British Museum's top brass: Director Sir John Wolfenden, Deputy Director, Maisie Webb, and Personnel Officer, Alan Gray, among others. Standing behind a screen from backstage, I could hear the buzz; the pre-Show chatter of expectation from the audience rising above some softly played tasteful music that came through the Public Address System.

I was on edge, thinking of every last-minute thing that had to be said and done: in particular, DIRECTING the order of Appearances on the Bill, as well as encouraging each Performer. In at least a couple of cases, a sip of whisky was administered! Listening intently to the brave volunteers coming to terms with their self-belief, I reminded them of their noble service for the Charity at a time of real hardship for children not only in Britain, but also those who were starving in the famine-hit lands of the world.

When the first half of the Show ended, a Staff member, Roy Juggessar, a Mauritian-Indian, came backstage: He smiled broadly while telling me that he was *recording* the Show on audio-cassette tape. "How wonderful!" I said, because I was a passionate believer in the preservation of records and archival material. As Juggessar walked back to his position, I reflected on his generosity which was enormously helpful and pleasing: Music to my ears, so to speak.

The Theatre lights went out and, at last, the Show began. At the end of the first half, during the Interval, as the theatre lights came on, the Museum's Music Department Curator, John Fung's delightful piped-music was played. Though the sounds were soothing, there was absolutely no chance of me relaxing. Soon the Second Half of the Show had started, and once more, I was here and there, encouraging the Performers until the last note had sounded.

When the lights came back on, as if a spell had been broken, I went onstage and invited the Cast of Performers to join me: We lined up together and took a collective bow. The applause was long and loud; most thrilling and uplifting. I took a step forward; and made in my Speech, I thanked the British Museum Administrators, the Performers and the audience for their generous support of the Charity that was so much in need: "The Save the Children Fund needs every penny you have given," I said. "We can be proud of what we have achieved. We must not forget *this historic night!*" I stressed the last three words. Afterwards, as people milled about, many offered their congratulations and hailed the Show as a Success! I got home very late that night, feeling exhausted, but elated. The next day, I took the proceeds of just under £100 pounds in cash which I presented *personally* at the office of The Save the Children Fund in St James's Square.

On my way back to the British Museum, as I entered the grand Courtyard, I marvelled at what had happened just a few hours before; especially when the Charity Show was a thing unheard of in the British Museum; an event that was rare, still so few and far between elsewhere in large British Institutions.

In the days that followed, my popularity in the British Museum and Bloomsbury grew. And given Ms Webb's caution that never before had there been SUCH A CHARITY SHOW, its realisation had become a much talked about benchmark; something which many of us felt should be celebrated; and hopefully repeated!

There was, however, a surprising twist to this wonderful pre-Christmas occasion: Roy Juggessar, who had kindly volunteered to record the Show for posterity, told me that the Cassette Tape in his Recording Machine was blank; nothing of the eventual two-hour plus Show was recorded! I was crest-fallen; disappointed that Juggessar's expertise as a Sound Recordist was tested, but alas, his incompetence had robbed us all in the British Museum, as well as posterity, of a truly memorable recorded experience.

Nonetheless, another staff colleague, an amateur staff Photographer, was more professional. He gave me a set of colour photographs which he'd taken of the Performers, as well as one of me onstage, while I was addressing the audience at the end of the Show. I gratefully received these images which I hoped would become part of the British Museum's Picture Collection.

And so given my central agency as INTIATOR, PRODUCER-DIRECTOR of the Show, among other things, I marvel at how much has changed as Charities in Britain have gradually become more necessary and have gained ever greater headlines and support since my "dream idea" became a triumphant REALITY in the British Museum! While we take Children's Charities for granted, we should not forget the significance (both symbolic and real) of the perception of Charity for Children, not only at Christmas, but all-year-round. Most people know about "Children in Need" and other Charities, but though smaller in scale, in the years since Monday 11 December 1972, that first Save the Children Fund Show had generated some money, but also an enormous groundswell of Goodwill and fellow-feeling for change at the British Museum.

Looking back, the Show was fondly remembered by Museum staff over the years. Alas, many who had enjoyed the experience, have passed away. Today, however, as we approach the 11 December and the Christmas Season of 2022, looming ever larger is the 50TH ANNIVERSARY of the historic "SHOW" IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM in aid of THE SAVE THE CHILDREN FUND. This backstory to that extraordinary event commemorates and celebrates as a uniquely outstanding example, not only as a "dream" come true, but also as a never to be forgotten, shining example of human endeavour and co-operation. Looking forward in anticipation of the 50TH ANNIVERSARY, I pause, and reflect, mindful of these words:

"Some people see things as they are, and ask: Why? I dream of things that never were, and ask: Why not?"

*

RON RAMDIN

c Copyright, Ron Ramdin, 6 November 2022.

This 50th Anniversary Commemorative Article is an aspect of RON RAMDIN'S LEGACY.

For more information, please see *TURNING PAGES: The Extraordinary Autobiography of Ron Ramdin*
