

LEON VINT (1872-1943)

By Victor Welland

In December 1925 the *Era* theatrical newspaper carried a prominent advertisement for Vint's Theatres Limited of 142 Long Acre, London, WC2. Alongside a photograph of Leon Vint was placed the greeting "To Everybody. All You Wish Yourselves in 1926 and Beyond. Yours Until Niagara Falls. Leon Vint".

Leon Vint was then fifty-three years old. He had been associated with show business for the majority of his life but had passed his most successful period and the *Era* advertisement was a last attempt at placing himself before a disinterested public. His days as managing director of Vint's Theatres Limited were coming to an end, and although his company would not be officially wound up for another decade, within two years he would, not for the first time, be bankrupt.

Early Life

Leon Vint was born William Henry Moores on 2nd August 1872 at Skipton in North Yorkshire, the first child of Mark Moores (born Oldham in 1850) and Mary Ann Moores (formerly Bland, born Bingley in 1851). Leon's siblings were Ann (born 1875) Thomas (born 1876) and Mark (born 1879) all born at Embsay in North Yorkshire.

Both Oldham and Bingley, where Vint's parents were born, were centres of the textile trade, as was Skipton where they were married in June 1871. Cotton spinning had long been an industry of Skipton, and when Leon was born his father was an 'overlooker of mule spinners' in one of the factories there. The 'Mule' (so-called because it was a hybrid of two previous types of spinning frame) had been invented in the 1770s and replaced much hard labour previously done by hand. There had been a cotton spinning mill in Skipton since 1785 and Vint's father probably worked either at High Mill, originally powered by water but enlarged in 1825 when steam power was added, or at Belle Vue Mills, a cotton mill since 1830 and extended over the decades to eventually provide work for hundreds of people, on hundreds of looms. By the time of the 1881 census, however, Mark Moores was no longer employed in the cotton spinning industry, being described as a 'lecturer on phrenology'.

Reading of character by examination of the head was at one time considered a serious scientific theory, but by the late 19th century phrenology had been adopted by 'professors' or 'lecturers' who read heads for profit and practiced it more as an entertainment. Many practitioners were regarded as disreputable people in whom only the most gullible were likely to believe. It is not known how Mark Moores became interested in the subject but he was never to return to working in the cotton industry again!

On the evening of 3rd April 1881 Leon's mother was staying with her parents at East Marton in North Yorkshire with her other three children. (The youngest, Mark, died a couple of months later aged 2). She described herself as a 'Professor's wife' – a title was often used in the entertainment world to add a certain 'authority' to a performer's routine, and when Leon also became an entertainer he adopted 'Doctor' alongside his name for a while. Mark Moores was lodging at 9 Friar Street in Lancaster with his son Leon, still William Henry Moores and then aged 8. It is likely that Mark Moores was entertaining at some venue in the city. Ten years later they were both still 'on the road' (at Coventry) Mark still a phrenologist and Leon (recorded on the census as Harry Moores) by then a hypnotist.

Entertainment World

Having moved around the country with his father on the phrenology tours, it was not unlikely that Leon himself should enter the world of entertainment. Some time during the 1880s he adopted the name of Leon Vint and became a hypnotist. Putting people in a temporary trance-like state under which the subject was rendered susceptible to suggestion, was first practised (seriously) by an Austrian physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815). Mesmerism was the name given to it but the term 'hypnosis' was coined by a British surgeon James Braid (1795-1860). Like phrenology, hypnosis was also regarded suspiciously when performed as entertainment. It is not known why hypnotism appealed to Leon or when precisely he began performing to an audience.

Vint 'donned the purple' in 1891, aged nineteen, establishing a touring theatrical company of which he was the main performer. At the end of the year he was in trouble with his act, which brought about a court case in which his father was one of the witnesses. The Times of 8th December reported the circumstances in a paragraph headed "Pretended Hypnotism":

At Wolverhampton police-court yesterday, Harry Moores, alias Dr Vint, Leon Vint, Dexter Vint, and Oubas, of Morecambe and 264 Wheeler Street, Birmingham, was charged that he "unlawfully did use pretended hypnotism and mesmerism to deceive and impose on certain persons."
There were several charges ranging from November 16 to 21 inclusive. Three weeks ago the defendant gave performances as a mesmerist and hypnotist in the Exchange hall, Wolverhampton, and the present prosecution, which was instituted by the chief constable, arose therefrom. It was alleged that the performances, instead of being bona fide, were based on collusion with assistants or confederates of the defendant. Late in the evening, after two hours deliberation, the Bench fined the defendant £5 and costs on one charge and 1 shilling and costs on others, the fines and costs amounting to £25 2s 6d. The town clerk, Mr Brevett, prosecuted, and Mr Bernard Abrahams, of London, defended.

The Morecambe address was most likely that of Mark Moores; Leon was probably resident in Birmingham at the time. Although the various stage names quoted in the case may have been used at several of the venues Leon travelled to around the country, it was the title of Leon Vint that became his adoptive name for the rest of his life. The incident was not to be the last such in his career as an entertainer.

Vint continued touring his hypnotism act, usually billed as Dr Vint, during the 1890s but five years after the Wolverhampton incident was in court again, this time at Chester. For the week commencing 28th September 1896 he was booked to appear at the Chester Music Hall. As a gimmick in his show of hypnotism and thought-reading, Vint put a man in a trance on the first evening of his week's engagement, to be awakened at the last show on Saturday night. The man was placed in a casket and the public were allowed to view him at all hours on payment of 6d. About a dozen men, who believed the act to be a fraud, went to view the man and on the Thursday night after eleven o'clock until the early hours of Friday, taking with them a bottle of whiskey for sustenance! Things got out of hand when the group attempted to awaken the hypnotised man who became distraught at their antics and a fight began. The police arrived and Vint appeared with a revolver threatening to use it against the unruly mob. The most offended man of the group brought the case against Vint for threatening behaviour. Although it turned out that the weapon wielded by Vint was only a toy cigar cutter shaped like a revolver, he was ordered to give security of £20 and keep the peace for three months and pay all costs. (The Chester Music Hall building is still in existence (2009), as a retail store. The original structure was a chapel, and dated from 1280. After various uses it was converted into the Theatre Royal in 1777, to a music hall in 1855 and a cinema from 1921 to 1961. It is listed Grade II.)

Lucy Ann Norcliffe

On 17th November 1898 Vint married Lucy Ann Norcliffe at Swindon Registry Office. Like Vint's father, Lucy's was also associated with the textile industry. Joseph Brook Norcliffe (1832-1888) had over the years applied himself to various occupations in one of the many mills in the Huddersfield area of West Yorkshire, eventually becoming a partner in his own mill at Holmfirth. Lucy was born on 8th October 1875, the third of his nine children. Her younger brother Harold (born 1881) was to become a cinema manager and Lucy must also have had an interest in the world of entertainment for after meeting Leon Vint she became an associate performer in his act. They were probably performing in Swindon when they married there. (They most likely met during 1896, as the first reference to Lucy in the pages of *The Stage* theatrical newspaper is in January 1897.)

Almost two years before their marriage, failure of Vint's business interests was recorded against him, but his debts were paid and a bankruptcy annulled. (Had Lucy's mother made a generous gesture to her future son-in-law? Lucy's father left a little over £1,200 when he died in 1888.) As "Madame Vint" Lucy accompanied her husband ("Doctor Vint") in a mind-reading act. On their appearance at the Royal Assembly Rooms in South Shields in August 1899 the *Era* newspaper reported "Messrs Vint draw large audiences to witness their variety entertainment and grand scenerama. The Biograph is

well appreciated and Madame Vint mystifies all by her clever thought-reading and clairvoyance.” Leon’s and Lucy’s performance was known as ‘zanciging’ – a reference to the same act performed by Julius and Agnes Zancig, Danish-American mind-readers who billed themselves ‘The Two Minds with but a Single Thought’. Julius stood in the theatre auditorium asking his blindfolded wife on stage to identify objects handed to him from members of the audience. The secret lay in coded speech between the two performers. Vint’s act must have been similar, although the Zancigs did not appear in London until 1906.

Vint was not only performing on stage but also managing a group of twenty or so variety entertainers who played in his company, initially called the ‘Grand Choir’ but soon renamed the ‘Globe Choir’. Vint’s father was no longer performing his phrenology act, but instead acting as his son’s manager. By 1901, however, he appears to have augmented his own ‘Mark Moores Empire Choir Company’.

Vint’s Theatres

Leon and Lucy continued performing their act during the first decade of the twentieth century and even toured the continent in 1903. In October 1907 *The Magician* monthly journal had Leon Vint, magician, on the front cover, but a couple of years later Vint was beginning to have greater ambitions for himself. In 1909 the *Era* theatrical newspaper reported: “*We learn that Mr Leon Vint has had for some time a new entertainment scheme in mind and when the right time comes he will launch it upon the world. What the new form of entertainment is Mr Vint will not at the moment disclose. If the new entertainment can equal the first years of the picture craze them Mr Vint has up his sleeve a fortune running into millions of pounds. An interesting announcement may be expected shortly.*”

The extraordinary pride in the statement (especially the wishful reference to millions of pounds) indicates that the piece had probably been composed by Vint himself. He was a great self-promoter! When the “interesting announcement” was made (in the *Bioscope* newspaper the following January) it was to the effect that Vint intended to retire from performing and touring and concentrate his energies on his cine-variety theatres. During 1909 he had opened two such venues, the first at Neath in South Wales in April, a second at Kettering in Northamptonshire in October. Although Vint may be regarded as one of the early pioneers of cinema exhibition, he was catching on to a trend that had already begun. After the first demonstration of moving pictures in 1896, enterprising showmen had shown the new medium in halls and, because the films were so short and shown from a single projector, supplemented them with live variety turns. Purpose-built cinemas were created from 1910, the year after the opening of Vint’s first theatres.

During 1909 the Vint’s gave their last appearances in the music halls in their entertainment titled “Vint’s Gigantic Federation” featuring their usual conjuring and clairvoyance act, with other turns including singers, sand-dancers, gymnasts, and short films on the American Bioscope. The shows were generally well regarded - when performed in Nuneaton that September the local newspaper reviewer considered that Vint

was a “Star Performer” and that Lucy gave a “wonderful show of ‘second sight’.” During the previous week they had played at the St James’s theatre in Long Eaton and the manager W Minto used the successful performances as advertising matter in the *Era*. He claimed that the Leon Vint Organisation’s first visit to his theatre had broken all records with takings for the week totalling more than £200. “My thanks are due to Mr Vint for bringing me such an attractive, up-to-date, powerful aggregation of talent” stated Minto “I consider there is nothing on the road to equal it as a money-making attraction for both himself and any resident manager.”

Leon Vint had made ample financial gains from his theatrical enterprises to enable him to build Globe Villa in Exmouth, Devon as the centre for management of his new cine-variety theatres. During 1910 he acquired five more theatres at locations comprising: Barry Dock, Loughborough, Rugby, Exmouth, and the Long Eaton playhouse that had just a year before been the responsibility of the grateful Mr Minto! They were named variously Palace, Hippodrome, or Picturedrome, but always prefixed with Vint’s name to make it absolutely clear, beyond doubt, that it was he who was the force behind them.

In 1911 he formed Vint’s Theatres Limited to continue his business of music hall, theatre and cinematograph proprietor. The Company enveloped his seven theatres, and the capital of £20,000 allowed him to receive a sum of £6,000 in cash and £14,000 in shares. Additionally he was the self-appointed managing director at £500 per year. During the year he acquired theatres at Ilkeston, Port Talbot, Aberavon, and Llanelli, and over the next two years theatres in Nuneaton, Longton, Northampton, Carmarthen, and another at Rugby. The prodigious effort in obtaining all these theatres, mostly on leasehold arrangements, was not without difficulties, nor quite as impressive as it seemed. Many of the playhouses were not in the finest condition, and the better ones which came under his name were generally in financial difficulties and in desperate need of an attempt to revive their fortunes. Most were in small towns, none were in towns or cities that could boast a robust level of audience attendance – an intended venue at Bradford, which Vint intended to name the “Welcome”, never materialised!

Perhaps typical of his association with the theatres he acquired was those at Nuneaton. Albert Francis Cross, the managing director of the Nuneaton Theatre and Entertainments Company, which ran the two theatres in the town, persuaded Vint to lease first the Empire music hall from April 1912, then the Prince of Wales theatre from August that year. Vint immediately renamed the first Vint’s Picturedrome, and the second, Vint’s Hippodrome. Neither was particularly successful under Vint’s proprietorship, and although the distance between his theatres meant that he rarely had chance to consult personally with his managers, a robust correspondence generally sufficed! Usually diplomatically polite in his letters to Cross, he could nevertheless be sharp in his criticisms when he felt the need arose. “You can take it from me I am very, very sorry you ever proposed this proposition to me and I am very sorry I ever took it on” he wrote to Cross a couple of years after taking the two theatres. In 1915 six of his theatres had to be surrendered in a deal which enabled him at least to retain the others.

With Fred Karno

Vint's residency in Exmouth was short-lived and he made a London home for himself and Lucy at a house named Greyfriars in Woodstock Road, Golders Green, and the same thoroughfare in which Marie Lloyd lived. Not far away was the famous Golders Green Hippodrome. He would never acquire such a prestigious hall, but did he imagine he ever could? He hardly needed to live in London for he never had a London theatre, nor did his office need to be located at 142 Long Acre, so near to the famous theatres of the really 'important' theatre proprietors, but Vint lived beyond the means that his minor theatrical enterprises earned for him and probably possessed inflated ideas of his worth and importance.

From 14th June 1915 Vint acquired another string to his bow when he became managing director of Famous Copyrights Limited. The company was set up to release American cinema films based on popular novels and keenly advertised itself as 'The Times Book Club of the Cinema'. The first picture was Elinor Glyn's romantic story *Three Weeks*. The five-reel film, with an undistinguished cast, had been released in America the previous year. Its popularity was probably due to the fact that Glyn's Edwardian novel, a nonsensical piece about a Balkan queen's erotic affair with a young British aristocrat, had at the time been considered a scandalous work. Famous Copyrights existed for more than three years, being voluntarily wound up on 16th October 1918.

Lucy Vint died on 10th January 1917 aged forty-one, at the Raikes Hall hotel in Blackpool. The 18th century house (still in existence) had been built as a gentleman's residence and passed through several uses until becoming an extensive park and gardens attraction from the 1870s until 1901 after which it became a hotel. Lucy was staying there with her friends John Clayton and his wife when she suddenly died after only three days, having suffered from complications brought on by an inflamed kidney. She was buried in Layton cemetery in Blackpool, but it is not known whether Vint attended her funeral. The headstone announced that she had been the 'Wife of Leon Vint' and bore the inscription 'A Loved One at Rest' but it is not known how amicable a relationship she and Vint had had. There appears to have been no children of the marriage, and Lucy must have given up entertaining when her husband did.

Vint continued the 'Leon Vint Tour' from his London base, sending his companies of entertainers out 'on the road' although most of his own theatres had been relinquished. He did however, accomplish the acquisition of a London venue when, in association with Fred Karno, he leased the Kingsway theatre in Great Queen Street in 1918.

Fred Karno (1866-1941) had, like Vint, been an entertainer before devising his own comical sketches and running his own theatres. His most popular work was *The Humming Birds*, a funny mime play that toured for many years. His phenomenal success earned him a great fortune. When he teamed up with Vint he had offices in Shaftesbury

Avenue, an apartment at the Albany off Piccadilly, and had created Karsino, a hotel, restaurant and entertainment centre.

The play they produced together was *A Weekend*, a farce by Walter Ellis with a distinguished cast of the day that included Yvonne Arnaud, Ernest Thesiger and Denis Neilson-Terry. It played first of all for a week at the Theatre Royal in York, (the *Era* claimed that “each part is excellently played”) and another successful week at Margate before opening at the Kingsway theatre on 12th September 1918. The delightful theatre survived many titles since its opening in 1882, until becoming the Kingsway when the famous theatrical personage Lena Ashwell took it over in 1907. A syndicate purchased the theatre from her in 1916, from which Vint and Karno leased it, reputedly for £80 pounds a week, for the mounting of *A Weekend*. Being a small theatre - it seated less than 600 - the play had a respectable six-month run of 176 performances and made a considerable profit. They passed on their lease of the theatre for £1,200 and the play began a long tour. (The Kingsway theatre suffered war damage in 1941 and was demolished in 1956).

Vint resumed his connection with Elinor Glyn's *Three Weeks* that same year when he produced a stage production of her ‘steamy’ novella at the Derby Hippodrome in November. Although the cast was unknown, it must have been as successful as the film version of the novel, for Vint presented it again at Derby the following year, this time at the Grand theatre in December. That same year (1919) he officially changed his name to Leon Vint for what he called ‘business reasons’ and continued his association with Fred Karno as *A Weekend* continued to tour; it was at the Derby Grand in May 1920. (Only a few years later Karno was in financial trouble, and it was ironic that Vint would eventually befall a similar fate.) Vint may have believed his association with the Derby Grand theatre was a fortunate one for him, having produced a couple of successful plays that had run there, and he acquired the theatre on lease from 10th October 1921. Vint's Theatres Limited first presentation was a production of Haldane Crichton's *The Very Idea* but Vint held the theatre only for a year. However he retained the desire to run theatres and in 1923 advertised in the Times for theatres, music halls or cinemas to lease, with the option to purchase. His theatres in Wales survived the longest, Vint's Palace in Neath surviving until 1926.

Later Years

Vint retained his office in Long Acre and in the 1920s lived at 100 Great Portland Street, having previously lived in the thoroughfare at 8 Portland Court. In March 1920 Vint had remarried. Winifred Mary Bedward was twenty years younger, but the partnership was not a long one for she petitioned for divorce in 1926. It is not known where the fault in the relationship lay, but Winifred remarried the following year and by that time Vint was in severe financial difficulties.

The similarities of Vint's later circumstances with those of his former associate Fred Karno are remarkable. Karno was bankrupt in October 1926 with liabilities totalling almost £17,000. Among the necessary changes to his lifestyle was the surrender of his

residence in the Albany for a more modest flat at 26 Charing Cross Road, and although the continued successful tours of *The Mummie Birds* still brought in some money, he was never again to be a wealthy man. The Music Hall Benevolent Fund provided him with a share of an off-licence business in Lilliput, Dorset from April 1937, and when he died in 1941, at the age of 75, he left a little over £42. Vint's first bankruptcy hearing was held on 28th July 1927. He willingly attributed his failure to bad business, family and legal expenses, and betting losses. His liabilities totalled nearly £15,000. At a second hearing in October that year Vint additionally admitted to living beyond his means, although it was stated that his situation was not helped by the slump in the theatrical and cinematic businesses and depreciation in the value of his share holdings. A year later Vint sought a discharge of his circumstances which was suspended for four years.

Vint was still the managing director of his company, but when his theatres in Wales finally succumbed to the dire situation in which he found himself, Vint's Theatres Limited was voluntarily wound up on 2nd August 1935. Just as a music hall charity had been benevolent to Fred Karno, Vint found himself in his later years under the support of the Cinematograph Trade Benevolent Fund. The charity was founded in 1924 to assist needy ex-employees of the cinema trade and Vint had himself initially been one of the 109 Vice-presidents supporting the Fund. (It still survives to serve its worthy cause, now known as the Cinema and Television Benevolent Fund). In his residence at Glebelands, the Fund's residential home in Wokingham, Surrey which had opened in 1936, Vint must have reflected on the enormous strides that cinema exhibition had taken over the years since his association with it. In 1943 Vint became ill and was taken to Greenlands hospital in Reading. At the time this was the Royal Berkshire Hospital for Paying Patients. He died there on 4th May 1943 at the age of 70. Heart failure was the ultimate cause but he had suffered infections of the urinary and nasal tracts, and hardening of the arteries.

Vint's will is dated 3rd July 1942. He appointed Reginald Charles Bromhead as the executor. Bromhead and his elder brother Alfred had established the British arm of the Gaumont film company, eventually buying out the French interests to establish the famous Gaumont-British Picture Corporation. Reginald was also associated with the Cinematograph Fund that had provided Vint's last home. Vint was appreciative enough of this to leave his few effects to the Fund for the maintenance of the Home. They only amounted to a little cash at Lloyd's Bank in Newport, South Wales; a Life Assurance Policy; and jewellery, and totalled a little over £147 which was a hundred pounds more than the sad Fred Karno had left a couple of years before. In his will Vint stated "Having looked after my relatives during my lifetime, I do not feel any obligation to do anything more." It is not known what level of communication he retained with his brothers and sisters and their families, or where his last resting place was to be. He left the decision with Reginald Bromhead: "I desire, if possible, to be cremated but, leave this entirely to the discretion of my Executor."

Film shows and live performers were uneasy partners in a single programme. Having been a performer himself it is understandable that Vint favoured the variety turns, and retained them when most theatres went over to a films-only programme. He never turned

any of his cine-variety theatres in to cinemas and may not, therefore, be regarded as one of the pioneers of cinema exhibition, but he is to be commended for supporting the variety theatre during the age when they were being overtaken by the crushing popularity of film.

