

The Wilson, Keppel and Betty Story



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Based on an illustrated talk given at the National Film Theatre, the Museum of the Moving Image and the Broadway, Nottingham, 1998-2004.

This is the story not only of what became one of the great turns of the variety stage for decades, but also the story of a piece of film. There are certain key pieces of archival film that stay in our collective consciousness and remain remembered by everyone. Film archivists know them so well because they are requested again and again. There is Chamberlain waving his piece of paper promising 'peace in our time'; there is the couple dancing the Charleston on the roof of a car as it drives down Kingsway; there is the procession of impractical and helplessly clumsy early aircraft crashing in succession into the ground; there is that hapless lady dignitary trying to launch a ship with a champagne bottle that will not smash; there is the suffragette throwing herself under a horse at the 1913 Derby; there are the troops going over the top in the Battle of the Somme; and there is the sand dance of Wilson, Keppel and Betty.

I worked at the National Film and Television Archive for a number of years, and I think it is probably true to say that this one piece of film was requested by the public more times than any other. There are

actually several pieces of film of their act in existence, but they have merged as one into that collective consciousness. People who have never seen the film or who never saw the act live still know the basic motions of the sand dance. It is a part of the culture of all of us.

So, who were Wilson, Keppel and Betty? It is a complicated story, and like many of the tales of the stars of music hall and variety, shrouded in contradictions and myth, but I think I have untangled a basic story.

Jack Wilson was born in Liverpool on January 29th, 1894. At a young age he emigrated to the United States where he made his stage debut as a high kicking dancer in 1909 in Bristol, Connecticut, before he journeyed to Australia and joined Colleano's Circus. He served in the Royal Navy during the First World War. Joe Keppel was a year younger, and was born on May 10th 1895 in County Cork, Ireland. As with Wilson, he emigrated to the United States at an early age, and made his stage debut in 1910 as a tap dancer with the Van Arnhem Minstrels in Albany. During the First World War he was with the RAF. How the duo met is uncertain, and it may have been in Australia before the war, but what is certain is that they teamed up with Colleano's Circus in Australia after being demobbed, and that they then travelled to the United States via Japan before launching their full stage career together in New York in March 1919, as a comedy acrobatic and tap dancing act. In Wilson's words, they were "hoofers" of the "Wooden Shoe" era, playing everything from a medicine show to curtain raiser to Jewish drama'.

Through hard work, diligence and skill they eventually made their way up the theatrical ladder to 'big time Vaudeville' in the late 1920s. In 1928 they teamed up with a dancer from Kansas. Her name was Betty Knox, and she had formerly been a stage partner of Jack Benny. They first appeared as a trio in Des Moines, Iowa, and began to develop what was to become their famous 'Cleopatra's Nightmare' sand dance routine, using Luigini's celebrated 'Ballet Egyptien' ballet music, originally arranged for them by Hoagy Carmichael. They used the band parts for three decades. Quite how and why they came up with such an act we do not know, but there was a tradition of sand dancing in the music halls, and the discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb in 1922 had created a fashionable interest in all things Egyptian.

They played at America's top vaudeville venue, the Palace New York, in May 1932, where they were spotted by Harry Foster, who booked them for four weeks at the London Palladium, where they first appeared on August 2nd 1932, third top act to Layton & Johnstone and Roy Fox and His Band. They were a sensation, British audiences instantly recognising the unique comedy of their po-faces, the mixture of elegance and inelegance in their dancing, and the slightly risqué routines.

So popular were they that they decided to settle in England, and became an established feature of British variety shows for three decades. They were chosen for the Royal Variety Performance in 1934, and were to be invited back again in 1945 and 1947. They became an established feature at the Alhambra and the

Palladium, and because the act was silent and hence instantly understandable to anyone, they received many offers from Europe.

They played in every kind of variety theatre throughout Britain, including cabaret and circus, and abroad played in such notable venues as the Berlin Wintergarden, where it is reported that in 1936 Goebbels was disgusted at the display of their bare legs, calling them 'bad for the morals of Nazi Youth'. Mussolini, however, is said to have loved the act.

They were filmed several times by British film companies for the compilation variety feature films that were then common. Sadly two of these performances, in the films *In Town Tonight* and *On the Air*, appear to be lost. Among those that survive are *Soft Lights and Sweet Music* (1936), *Variety Jubilee* (1943) and *Starlight Serenade* (1943), whose star was Bonar Colleano of the Colleano's Circus family which had brought Wilson and Keppel together in the first place.

Betty Knox retired from the act in 1941. She took up what became a successful career in journalism, even ending up reporting on the Nuremberg trials. She was replaced by her seventeen-year-old daughter Patsy, who had been born in Salina, Kansas in 1924, and who took on the stage name Betty when she replaced her mother. She joined the act on May 30th 1941 at the Hippodrome Preston, and made her London debut in August 1942 at the Streatham Hill Theatre. She stayed with the act until 1950.

There then followed a succession of other Bettys - perhaps as many as a dozen, but probably the total number used was eight - until the act eventually broke up in 1963. Among them were Irene Edwin-Scott, a classically-trained dancer from Glasgow; Edna May (who claimed to have been with the act from 1945-47); acrobatic dancer Jean 'Bunnie' Bamberger, and the last of them, ballet dancer and Windmill girl Jean Mackinnon. Hence all films of the trio after 1941 do not feature the original Betty, but her daughter Patsy.

The full Wilson, Keppel and Betty act was made up of several components, with variations played upon the formula over the years, but of course the sand dance was what made them famous. The 'Cleopatra's Nightmare' act was simplicity itself, being based on the old art of sand dancing, but was raised to new heights by the spindly frames with determined expressions of Wilson and Keppel, and a magical combination of gaucherie with artistry. The act generally opened with Betty performing a voluptuous dance with finger cymbals while the two men played whistle and tambourine and watched, before dancing in some obscure form of homage or imitation of her in long night-shirts and fezzes. This would be followed by the sand dance, with the sand often supplied from a Grecian urn and sometimes laid out on a collapsible board treated with glue that they brought with them to ensure an ideal dancing surface. For the sand dance they wore shorter tunics with headcloths. While they changed costumes Betty danced a solo. They then finished off with a riotous dance all together.

Because the act was mute it was internationally comprehensible and appreciated, and moreover it adjusted extremely well to the cinema, where they were able to employ knowing glances to greater effect. The act initially featured many props including a rickshaw and a platform with steps, but after a while they cut down the props to just a Sphinx backdrop, so the act was more transportable and fitted smaller stages. Although the basic act remained the same throughout, they played numerous variations on it, as can be seen from the film records, including Betty sporting a Cleopatra mask, and later Betty finishing off the act wearing a Wilson/Keppel mask with the trademark drooping moustache.

The way they worked on tour was like this. Jack Wilson took care of the bookings, the control of the act and the props. Whichever Betty it was took care of the costumes. Joe Keppel took care of the sand. Best coarse-grained Bedfordshire sand it was, which they carried round with them in sackloads to be sprinkled on stage before the sand dance. According variety journalist Bert Ross: 'he searched all over England for the right texture of sand and eventually found some similar to that used by the Metropolitan Water Board. In time he became a sand expert and knew more about this commodity than a desert Sheik. He even took some of his favourite English sand back to Las Vegas when the trio fulfilled an engagement in the gambling city'.

Wilson, Keppel and Betty, as well as making numerous film appearances, some of them now lost, also appeared several times on television in the 1950s. So far as is known, none of these performances has survived. Also at this time they played everywhere from London to Las Vegas, travelling to India, the Near and Far East (King Farouk apparently loved them), Australia, Scandinavia, South Africa and the USA. In what has to be one of the most amazing variety pairings of all time, they even appeared on the same bill as Frank Sinatra when he appeared at the London Palladium for a short season during July 1950.

As the variety boom died away, however, so the bookings got fewer and the theatres got smaller, and as this extract from Eric Midwinter's *Make 'Em Laugh*, a history of variety, points out, it was not all fame and comparative fortune for the trio as the years rolled by:

[Wilson, Keppel and Betty were] all that was most immaculate and most satisfying about variety. Their impeccably timed cameo of work and play in the Arab bazaar rightly earned both the earlier adulation and the later tributes. But what of in between times? I was prepared to travel at some length to watch them, and eventually found myself in dilapidated halls, scheduled for closure, until, deep in the fifties, I last saw their names low on a bill posted on a wall for a third-rate revue in a declining Lancashire Mill town. Their act was unchanging, one might say as eternal as the sand they sprinkled for their sandals to grate and rasp upon. But suddenly there was really no place for it, and a torn poster on the derelict wall of a now declining once humming textile centre told it all.

It is a poignant account, but maybe overstating the case a little, as they enjoyed a lively and popular last few years. In the late 1950s the act had something of a revival when ballet dancer and sometime Windmill girl Jean Mackinnon joined the act as the eighth Betty, and brought new life and fresh arrangements. They toured Europe, enjoyed a residency in Paris, and could still be found on the bill of British variety shows amid the pop singers and television comedians of the new age, but the two men were each approaching seventy.

They were ever keen to go on, but their bodies told them otherwise. They retired from the stage in 1963. Joe Keppel returned to his native Cork and died there around 1977 aged 82. Jack Wilson took up residence at Brinsworth House in 1967, where he reportedly enjoyed an active and sociable retirement, and died on August 24th 1970.

All sources that I have consulted speak warmly of the two men, who showed an avuncular care towards their various Bettys, and who were clearly much liked in the variety world. Of the two, the dapper and always beautifully dressed Joe Keppel was the more retiring, returning home each night 'to count his money'. Jack Wilson, the dominant figure in the business partnership, was the more gregarious, the life and soul of parties, but sartorially the very opposite of his elegant partner.

Their fame lived on beyond them, not only in the memories of those who saw them, but because of the popularity of the film clips on television. They featured in the recent television history of British variety, *Heroes of Comedy*, and somewhat unexpectedly a clip of them was used in the documentary *The Filth and the Fury*, about the Sex Pistols (apparently they were a great influence on Johnny Rotten). Most recently, they featured in the picture round of an episode of *Have I Got News for You*, where Paul Merton turned out, quite rightly, to be an enthusiastic fan.

And that is the Wilson, Keppel and Betty story. They inspired many imitators, but none came close to the mixture of anarchy, suggestiveness, humour, grace and knobbly knees that made Wilson, Keppel and Betty a unique phenomenon. As the music hall journal *The Call Boy* put it, 'Wilson, Keppel and Betty was a marvellous act, the epitome of real variety'. Clever, clean and very funny. It was the pros' favourite act because the performance on the side of the stage when Jack and Joe made their quick changes of costume while Betty danced her solos was as funny as their stage act. Every move of their changes was timed to perfection'. Praised by their peers and loved by audiences for decades, the legend of Wilson, Keppel and Betty lives on.

Filmography

This is a list of all the known films in which Wilson, Keppel and Betty appeared. Some are now believed to be lost, and the trio also made some television appearances in the 1950s which can no longer be traced..

- 1933 Pathetone Weekly No 164 (available as free download from <http://www.britishpathe.com>)
- 1934 In Town Tonight [lost film]
- 1934 On The Air [lost film]
- 1936 Soft Lights and Sweet Music
- 1943 Starlight Serenade
- 1943 Variety Jubilee
- 1944 Highlights of Variety [nos. 24, 25] [lost film]
- 1948 For Old Times' Sake [lost film]
- 1948 Merrygoround [lost film]
- 1948 The Peaceful Years
- 1948 Variety Makers
- 1949 Scrapbook For 1933
- 1950 A Ray of Sunshine

The trio also appeared a number of times on British television in the 1950s.