

BY THE WAY



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Performers on Wodehouse's Stage

The March issues of *By The Way* for the next few years will feature stars of the stage who appeared in Broadway and West End shows associated with Wodehouse. The summaries have been compiled by **Eddie Grabham**.

Gertrude Lawrence

Born in 1898, Gertrude Lawrence became a star of musical comedy, revue and straight plays.

Affectionately known as 'Gertie', she made her stage debut as a dancer in a 1908 pantomime. She attended Italia Conti's stage school; years later, in 1927, when Plum and Guy Bolton went to visit their star to discuss *Oh, Kay!*, a photograph of a very young Gertrude Lawrence intrigued the pair. It prompted her to tell the story of how, when she fumbled her only line in rehearsal for her first production, it was given to a precocious youth named Noel Coward. Fourteen years on, Gertie was still vowing revenge!

The story is told in *Bring on the Girls*, but it is probably as colourfully inaccurate as the stories she told about 'dancing barefoot to barrel-organs outside Dickensian pubs' (see *The Great Stage Stars* by Sheridan Morley). Most accounts suggest that she first met Coward whilst both were travelling as child performers by train in 1913 to appear in a Liverpool Repertory Theatre production.

Her big break came in 1921. Impresario André Charlot had sacked her and vowed he would never employ her again. However, shortly before his revue *A to Z* was due to open, Bea Lillie found herself in hospital. Charlot was desperate, so he gave the part to Gertie.

Gertie was reunited with Noel Coward in Charlot's *London Calling*, in which she turned Coward's *Parisian Pierrot* into a lasting hit. Charlot then took her to New York to appear in *London Revue of 1924*. Two more Charlot revues followed before Gertie was cast in her first 'book' show, the Bolton-Wodehouse-Gershwin *Oh, Kay!*

Noel Coward wrote the parts of Amanda and Elyot in *Private Lives* for Gertie and himself in 1930. Although Coward was a life-long friend and dominant influence in Gertie's career (the couple also appeared together in his *Tonight at 8.30*), she also appeared in many other shows, including

Wodehouse's 1929 adaptation of *Candlelight* at the Empire, New York, in which she starred opposite Leslie Howard.



With Oscar Shaw in *Oh, Kay!*

Cole Porter wrote the score for *Nymph Errant* in 1933, giving Gertie the delicious *Physician* number; Kurt Weill and Ira Gershwin's *Lady in the Dark*, in 1941, provided another success; and Rodgers and Hammerstein's *The King and I*, in 1951, resulted from her own suggestion that the couple write a musical based on *Anna and the King of Siam*. Gertie died of cancer in 1952, before she could realise her ambition to play Anna in London.

She made occasional films, her last being the 1950 film version of *The Glass Menagerie*. Julie Andrews played Gertie in the biopic *Star!*, but despite some fine sequences, it was not a success.

Quite simply, Gertie was a great stage star.

Leslie Howard

Born of Hungarian parents in London in 1893 with the name Leslie Stainer, Leslie Howard was educated at Wodehouse's *alma mater* Dulwich College. Invalided out of World War I in 1917, he took up acting to help him recuperate and had little trouble finding work in the professional theatre. By the mid-1920s he was on Broadway in a string of hits which included *Outward Bound* and at the Empire in 1927, *Her Cardboard Lover*, a Wodehouse adaptation from Jacques Duval in which he played

opposite Jeanne Eagels. Such was his performance that all the critics agreed that he stole star billing from the better-known lead. He also played the London run, with Tallulah Bankhead.

In 1929, he again starred at the Empire, New York, in Wodehouse's adaptation of *Candlelight* by Siegfried Geyer, opposite Gertrude Lawrence (see above).



The following year he made his screen debut in the film version of *Outward Bound*, quickly establishing himself as a film as well as stage star. Though the studios kept him busy, he returned to Broadway to appear in Robert E Sherwood's *The Petrified Forest* with the 36-year-old Humphrey

Bogart playing a gangster for the first time. When Warner Brothers decided to film the play, Howard insisted that Bogart reprise his role on screen.

By the late 1930s, Howard had established himself as a major film star in films like *Stand In*; *Pygmalion*; and *Gone with the Wind*. He returned to Britain in 1940 to make a series of war-related films including *Pimpernel Smith*; *The 49th Parallel*; and *The First of the Few*. The shock of his sudden death in 1943 is summed up by the *New York Times* headline:

Nazis hit airliner; Leslie Howard put among 17 missing

Other Performers in the Shows

In addition to these two stars, a number of other actors and actresses played their parts in making the shows successful. These included:

Jeanne Eagels

Her role in the New York production of *Her Cardboard Lover* proved to be her last appearance on Broadway, after her career as a comedy actress was cut short by the alcohol abuse which led to her early death in 1929.

Oscar Shaw

Appeared in the New York production of *Oh, Kay!*, one of almost twenty Broadway roles between 1915 (*Very Good, Eddie*) and 1941. He also appeared in the Wodehouse-Bolton-Kern show *Leave It To Jane* and the Wodehouse-Bolton-Armand Vecsey show *The Rose of China*.

Victor Moore

Appeared in the New York production of *Oh, Kay!* He was a prolific performer in musical comedy on Broadway in a career stretching from 1906 to 1957, especially so in the period from 1925 to 1946. His best-known shows were *Funny Face*; *Of Thee I Sing*; and the Wodehouse-Bolton-Cole Porter show *Anything Goes*.

Reginald Owen

Appeared on the Broadway stage in more than a dozen plays, mainly between 1925 and 1932. As well as appearing in the New York production of *Candlelight*, he was also in Wodehouse's very successful adaptation of Ferenc Molnar's *The Play's*



the Thing in 1926, at the Henry Miller Theatre.

Tallulah Bankhead

An American actress who starred in the London production of *Her Cardboard Lover* and took the show on a New England revival tour in 1941. She had a prolific career on stage, both

in the UK and the USA, and in the movies.

She became notorious for her unorthodox behaviour. Although in her youth she lost a part in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde* by refusing John Barrymore's invitation to the casting couch, in later years she liked to remove all her clothes at social events and chat to fellow-guests in the nude. She would also throw wild parties which lasted for days.

Details of the Relevant Shows

Oh, Kay!, starring Gertrude Lawrence

New York, Imperial Theatre, 1926

London, His Majesty's Theatre, 1927

Her Cardboard Lover, starring Leslie Howard

New York, Empire Theatre, 1927

London, Lyric Theatre, 1928 (with Tallulah Bankhead)

Candlelight, starring Gertrude Lawrence and Leslie Howard

New York, Empire Theatre, 1929