

JOHNNY LADD

Skate prints in the sand

Entertainer

Born: February 19, 1924**Died:** June 27, 2004

ONE of this country's most beloved entertainers has left the stage.

For most of his 80 years Johnny Ladd made people laugh. He was an expert journeyman comic whose artistry sprang from the rich traditions of British music hall, variety and pantomime.

Born in Shardlow, Derbyshire, Ladd was nine when his parents took him to see *Robinson Crusoe* at the Grand Theatre, Derby. It was love at first sight! He decided there and then that his would be the life of an entertainer.

Though his family had no theatrical connections, they encouraged him to present plays at home, and at school he participated in a stream of plays and pantos. He was still at school when war broke out, and he made his farewell appearance there as Mr Puff in Sheridan's *The Critic*.

In 1941 he enlisted in the Royal Air Force. With another future comedy great, Frank Thornton, he ran a forces radio station at Heaton Park base, after which he went into air crew training, initially at York and later in Canada.

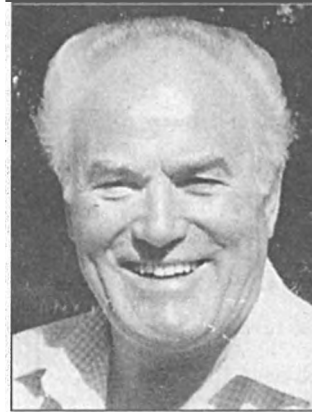
After the end of the war in Europe, Ladd joined Ralph

Reader's RAF Gang Shows with Dick Emery and Tony Hancock — with whom he later shared "digs". He entertained troops in Europe and Asia, and was in the first British revue company to tour Japan after the war.

Back in Britain, work was elusive, so Ladd made ends meet by working as a male model. In 1948 he joined Clive Dunn and Hattie Jacques at the Players' Theatre, London's only genuine Victorian music hall. Here he presided as an ebullient chairman and also developed his loveable "Chelsea Pensioner" characterisation, which he recycled for many years. He also gained valuable experience at the infamous Windmill, where budding comics tried to divert male patrons whose enthusiasms were mainly reserved for the tiny theatre's famous nudes.

In 1951 Johnny Ladd played in his first ice show. He stayed "on ice" for eight years, and played "dame" in five ice pantomimes. He wrote, directed and played the title role in the enormously successful *Queen of Hearts* panto at the vast Empire Stadium, Wembley. There were also many cheery summer variety shows at seaside resorts like Bognor Regis and Bournemouth.

Ladd's big break came in 1956 when he was cast as "juvenile lead" in *Grab Me a*

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Gondola, a bright new British musical that premiered at the Theatre Royal in Windsor. The show went on to play for 673 performances in the West End, and then toured Britain, with Ladd as resident director.

In 1959 he was recruited by Australian theatrical entrepreneurs J.C. Williamson Theatres to direct and star in the show in this country. *Grab Me a Gondola* opened at the Empire Theatre, Sydney, on 2 May 1959 and subsequently played merrily throughout Australia and New Zealand, though not in Melbourne, where no suitable theatre was available.

After this Ladd transferred to the Tivoli Circuit, who featured him as a skating comedian in *Ecstasy on Ice* and *Dame*

Petunia Perkins in *Robinson Crusoe on Ice*: "Look," his Dame Petunia would chortle, "Skate prints in the sand!"

Ladd decided to make Australia his home. In 1960 he joined John Bluthal's Gaslight Music Hall on TCN-9, a weekly show in the tradition of the nostalgic Players' shows with which he was so familiar.

After this came the national version of *The Bobby Limb Show* on the Nine Network, and Graham Kennedy's *In Melbourne Tonight*.

Johnny was resident comedy producer and participated in many sketches. By the time he left the show nine years later, he had a hand in over 3000 sketches. He also found time to appear in *Between Ourselves*, an ABC variety series with Tikki Taylor, Bill Newman and Kevan Johnston.

With Jill Perryman and Johnny Lockwood, Ladd starred in *When We Are Married*, Tommy Tycho's musical version of J.B. Priestley's play, which had a successful run at Sydney's Phillip Theatre in 1970. After this Ladd found new audiences in the convivial theatre restaurants that were thriving in Sydney and Melbourne.

In the early 1970s he worked in Sydney with Gloria Dawn at the Doncaster Theatre Restaurant and at the Fishmongers' Hall Theatre Restaurant; and in Melbourne at the Red Gar

ter Music Hall (the former Lido) and at Annabel's in Alfred Place, and with partner Joe Latona he created a shipboard revue for Shaw Savill's Expo 70 cruise to Japan.

On television he had featured roles in the police drama series *The Link Men*, and in the notorious *Number 96*, in which he played a TV quizmaster, Jimmy Jock. He was also a judge on the *New Faces* talent quest, which discovered comedian Paul Hogan. Ladd went on to produce comedy on Hogan's television show for seven years.

In 1978 Ladd and Latona produced the entertainment for The Londoner, Dennis Gowing's revamp of Annabel's. Their J.J. Productions also created many trade shows, fashion parades and special functions.

Though his health deteriorated in recent years, Johnny retained his deep love of the business and the people in it. The ready wit and the twinkle in his eye remained right until the end.

Johnny Ladd will be remembered by friends and colleagues at a gala tribute concert at the Princess Theatre on Monday, 30 August at 1pm.

Everyone is welcome.

Frank van Straten, OAM,
(Melbourne writer, broadcaster and performing arts historian)