

2014

Audio Link 6.1

Norman Smith

Ben Siems

Sears Eldredge
Macalester College

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Recommended Citation

Smith, Norman; Siems, Ben; and Eldredge, Sears, "Audio Link 6.1" (2014). *Audio Clips for Captive Audiences / Captive Performers*. 29.
<http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/captiveaudiencesaudio/29>

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Video Link 6.1

This video clip is part of Professor Sears Eldredge's investigation of the musical and theatrical performances that occurred in Japanese prisoner of war camps in Southeast Asia during World War II.

Let's take a closer look at the two black and white photographs taken on Leo Britt's Wunderbar production at Chungkai in May 1944. It is assumed they were taken by a Japanese photographer so they could be used for propaganda purposes. The imperial Japanese army needed to show the outside world how well they were taking care of their Allied prisoners of war. And what could prove their claim better than photographs showing happy POWs putting on an elaborate musical comedy?

0:34 Since people in the photographs clearly acknowledge the presence of the camera, these are not secret, but official photographs. But no mention of these photographs being taken has been found in POW documents. John Coast, who was stage manager for the show and writes about every other aspect of the production, does not mention this event, and Hugh de Wardener and Terry Mars, who were in the cast, had no recollection of the photographs being taken either. There might be a reason for this amnesia. Willing participation in photographs that could be used for propaganda purposes, such as these smiling POWs appear to be, could be construed as aiding and abetting the enemy, a court martial offense. But the threat of punishment for refusing to have one's picture taken made that choice not an option.

1:26 What they could do, though, was figure out ways to subvert the propaganda value of the photographs. It is important to realize that the people in the photographs have not been arranged by the photographer, but by the director, Leo Britt. As a professionally trained theatre person, he used the theater's ability to communicate meaning by gesture, space relationships, costume and lighting to undercut any propaganda value the photographs might be given. The first photograph is a standard production shot of the cast and crew on stage and the orchestra in the pit. Our attention is immediately drawn to the row of figures standing in the back but as we continue to look it dawns on us that there is an unusual group of non performers sitting along the front edge of the stage.

2:17 These beaming figures are the Japanese and Korean soldiers assigned to guard the POW performers. By encouraging them to be in the photograph, Britt makes clear to the viewer the real context in which this musical takes place. But it also means that they couldn't be watching what he was doing elsewhere. Behind them crouch or kneel five members of the cast, in the center, as well as members of the technical and running crews, some of whom are members of the Netherlands East Indies Army. The cast behind them is standing in their curtain call

arrangement: the performers in the center are the stars of the show, and the rest of the actors are spread out on either side of them in order of importance.

3:04 Since the viewer's immediate focus is on the central figures, it is the areas of least importance, the far edges of the photograph, where Britt makes his subversive statements. The next to last figure standing at stage left has his arms crossed, but his left hand is visible and his index finger is pointing to his right, our left. Two figures to his right is Eddie Edwards and he has his right hand up beside his head, palm forward as in a military salute. But here, instead of a salute, Edwards is giving Winston Churchill's two fingers, v for victory sign. One would not have been surprised given this context to see his hand turned the other way around, which is the British equivalent of the middle finger gesture. Had Edwin's gesture been understood by any Japanese in the know, he would have been severely punished. The figure standing by the proscenium arch at stage right is producer director Leo Britt, who is proffering a toast to the viewer. He is wearing a Japanese undergarment called a *fundoshi*, a garment the POWs call a "jap happy". But this is very strange. One would think that a director would dress up not down for a photo session promoting his production. Against the other fully dressed figures on the stage, Britt's undress looks even more shocking. And that's the point. Britt wants to underscore that the costumes worn by the characters on stage does not reflect the availability of clothing worn by the POWs off stage. What Britt is wearing is the everyday clothing.

4:55 The second photograph shows the *Wonderbar* cabaret scene from act three of the musical. Visible in the vacated orchestra pit is the camp made bass viol lying on its side. This extraordinary construction from scrounged materials is explained in chapter 12 part 2. This time, instead of using the figures standing at the proscenium arch stage right and stage left to make additional subversive statements, as in the previous photograph, Britt has framed the scene with waiters holding drink trays. This means, we have to look elsewhere for any possible subversive statements. And framing might be a vital clue toward that end. When we first look at the photograph, our eyes bounce back and forth between two brightly lit groups of people. Those on the left and those on the right, each with its own attractive female impersonators. Once our eyes settle down, we spot a figure standing upstage in the shadows, alone and separate from the two main groups. He stands upstage at the apex of a triangle, framed by the figures downstage of him, and by the doorway behind him with his brightly lit backdrop of snow covered mountains. Besides these framing devices, Britt has used a directing techniques of stage area, isolation, and light and shadow to make us focus on this figure. As we move in closer, we see it is Eddie Edwins, giving the v for victory salute once again. Unfortunately the deep shadows caused by the sunlight hitting the front of the stage obscures a clear view of that gesture. But Britt knew that when he staged the scene. His salute would be unnoticed by the casual observer. And this

may also explain why the female impersonator Bobby Spong does not have his right arm and hand raised in the toast like the others in his group. From the camera's point of view, it would take away the viewer's awareness of Edwin's isolation, and thus what Britt wants his perceptive viewers to focus on.

7:09 If these photographs were used for propaganda purposes, somebody back home would read the coded messages in both photographs as subversive gestures of defiance. But the performers are smiling at the camera, and apparently toasting the viewer is really a cover for their duplicity. They are play acting to deceive unsuspecting viewers. Behind the fake smiles though, are real smiles because they are successfully fooling their captors. And the toast should be read not only as an acknowledgement of the viewer, but more importantly as support for Edwin's v for victory subversive gesture.