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Chapter 13. “Precious Personalities”: The Entertainment Producers

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Chapter 13: “Precious Personalities”

The Entertainment Producers

Being entertainers in the hospital and relocation base camps in Thailand carried enormous prestige and gave the performers celebrity status. John Cosford called those at Chungkai the “Chungkai stars.” Basil Peacock went even further, anointing them “the aristocrats of the camp, being looked upon as precious personalities.” Both Cosford and Peacock are referring to the performers they saw onstage weekly. Similar sentiments could be heard in other camps about their entertainers.

Behind the scenes were the musical and choral conductors and the theatrical directors, who got less attention but were also acknowledged as “wonderfully talented.” These were the entertainment producers—the orchestra conductors, choral directors, and theatrical producer-directors—men whose talents, training, and experience, as well as personnel and organizational skills, created shows that turned performers into “stars.” This group of “precious personalities” will be honored here.

Though many men had produced musical and theatrical shows in their initial POW camps and later Up Country during the railway construction, only the activities of entertainment producers in the base hospital and relocation camps in Thailand during 1944–45 will be acknowledged below.

Keeping thousands of men entertained weekly with new and exciting shows in camps was an enormous challenge to their energies and creative abilities.

Orchestra Conductors

The major band or orchestra conductors in these camps were Bill Bainbridge (Chungkai), Eric Cliffe (Chungkai, Tamuang, Kanburi Officers’ Camp), “Ace” Connolly (Chungkai, Nong Pladuk), Tony Gerrish (Tamarkan), T. Gray (Nakhon Pathom), Gus Harffey (Chungkai, Kanburi Hospital Camp, Kanburi Officers’ Camp), Ernest Lenthall (Chungkai), Norman Smith (Chungkai, Tamuang, Nakhon Pathom, Kanburi Officers’ Camp), and Norman Whittaker (Tamarkan).

Figure 13.1. Norman Whittaker’s Brass Band at Tamarkan. Rae Nixon, Australian War Memorial. Courtesy of Mrs. Rae Nixon.

1 Unfortunately, this excludes the marvelous construction camp producers like director Charles Woodhams and conductor Reginald Nixon. Wim Kan gets his due in Chapter 8: “Breakout.”
Most of these men were professionally trained, and the music they played was primarily popular, including swing. A few conductors (Smith, Lenthall) included light classical music in their repertoire. Eric Cliffe was the sole conductor of classical music concerts, and it was noted with much appreciation that he singlehandedly “saved the captivity for classical musicians.” All of them conducted pit orchestras for the theatrical offerings.

**Choral Directors**

Lesser known were the choral directors. These men were usually involved in organizing choirs for religious services, but on certain occasions they took part in orchestral concerts or, like *The Christmas Spirit* performed at Chungkai in 1944, presented full choral concerts. The few names of choral directors we know are Gibby S. Inglefield (Chungkai), A. P. A. Clemens (Chungkai?), T. Gray (Nakhon Pathom), and Norman Halliday (Tamarkan).

**Theatrical Directors**

The theatrical directors had, perhaps, the most difficult task in providing entertainment for the POWs, as they had to create shows from what could be remembered of what they had seen on stage or in film or heard on the radio. Songs and comic sketches had to be recalled or written anew; for the pantomimes and musical comedies, complete scripts had to be drawn from memory. Some scripts for straight plays were available, brought Up Country from Singapore; others had to be remembered and reconstructed. A few original revues, musical comedies, and mystery-thrillers were written, such as Bob Gale’s musical *Escapado Argentino* at Nong Pladuk.

Creating these productions was undoubtedly a group effort, with everyone contributing his recollections, but it was up to the producer-director to develop the final product and work with the designers and technicians to articulate a production concept. And then, of course, men needed to be found who could perform the material and the whole show rehearsed so that “it’ll be alright on the night.”

The major theatrical producer-directors in the hospital and relocation camps were John D. V. Allum (Chungkai, Nong Pladuk), Leo Britt (Chungkai), Norman Carter (Tamarkan), Eddie Edwins (Chungkai), Bob Gale (Nong Pladuk), David Gregg and John Lovell (Kanburi Hospital Camp), Jim Jacobs (Tamarkan), Wim Kan (Nakhon Pathom), “Fizz” Pearson (Chungkai, Nakhon Pathom), Joop Postma (Chungkai, Tamuang), John “Nellie” Wallace (Chungkai), and Nigel Wright (Chungkai, Nakhon Pathom).

Nearly all these men specialized in one or two types of entertainment, but Lieutenant John D. V. Allum produced the whole range of entertainment possibilities. Allum had no formal training or experience in professional theatre and first discovered his talents as a producer in 1942 as officer in charge of a worksite concert party in Keppel Harbour, Singapore. Later, as entertainments officer in Nong Pladuk, he was responsible for all the shows produced in the camp. Though he did not personally direct each one, of the twenty-nine shows produced there between Christmas 1943 and January 1945 (the majority of which were variety and revues), Allum staged at least twenty-two of them—a staggering achievement. (To read a letter of appreciation to Allum from Dutch Army Captain B. Sluimers, who was officer-in-charge of the N.E.I. concert party in Nong Pladuk’s Camp No. 2, see Figure 13.2 in the Image Gallery.)

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iii Many of them with assistant producer Noel Woods.
Production Practices

Unfortunately, we know little about how the musical or theatrical producer-directors went about developing, rehearsing, and/or staging their shows.

But Norman Pritchard and Fergus Anckorn recalled the production practices under Allum where scripts for comic sketches were developed and rehearsed while the performers were on working parties. Pritchard, who sometimes worked outside the camp on “heavy duty” details, wrote, “It was possible, with some effort to work for ten, or twelve, or even more hours, with poor food, little to drink in very difficult circumstances on a monotonous, soul-destroying job, and still be able to think about plans for a concert, or a talk, or a discussion. A great deal of preparation was done on working parties.”

Anckorn described how these rough scenarios were rehearsed while working on “light duty” details inside the camp.

Some of us were in camp during the day, and we’d rehearse what had to be rehearsed.

“You come in with the guns and do this. You say, ‘Dropa ze gunsa.’”

“And then what?”

“Well, let’s do this?”

And then we’d write it down, in rough form. And then when they’d got it in rough form, we’ve got a sort of story . . . there was always a girl in it, usually Basil Ferron . . . and they would tidy up the script. And then, those who had the opportunity would learn it.

If it couldn’t be written down, it was rehearsed verbally. Nothing was exact. You said what you had to say as well as you could say it, so long as that went all right. . . . But we kept within the main script of the thing. And it all worked very well. And when we performed it, it was to huge applause everywhere, because it was the one highlight of the week . . . and it sort of grew together just by everyone doing their bit.”

Anckorn went on to describe what happened when a roughly sketched scenario did not “grow together” as planned during a performance:

And if there was a piece in this script which wasn’t gelling too well, they would get me, for instance, in the play to [suddenly appear from the wings and say,]

“Stop! Stop! Say, have you seen this trick?” And I would do a few tricks and then we’d catch up to the script again.

But they were very well received and people used to look forward to them. And when I think back, I find it very difficult to remember how we did rehearse them all. Because on the night of every show, it went like clockwork.
Fully scripted musicals, on the other hand, like *Escapado Argentino*, were the creation of a single playwright.

In contrast to the amateur producers, Norman Carter and Leo Britt had both been involved in professional theatre before the war (Carter as an actor-producer in Australia, Britt as an actor in England) and brought the values and practices of that experience with them. They both had high regard for “production values”—the theatrical elements that make performances visually exciting—and were notorious for challenging their design and technical staffs to produce extraordinary sets, costumes, lighting, and props for their productions.\(^iv\)

The major difference between them lay in their work with actors. At Tamarkan, Carter produced only book-revues, musicals, and pantomimes—theatrical forms with simple plotlines and stereotypical characters, so his rehearsals with actors were minimal. He expected them to be “letter perfect”\(^v\) for the first rehearsal when he blocked the show\(^vi\)—the mark of a director who is used to working with professional actors and not one who intends to spend time coaching actors about their craft. He also was forced to operate within very strict regulations that limited the length of his rehearsals. Nevertheless, Carter produced a marvelous set of shows at Tamarkan, earning praise from Albert Coates, the senior medical officer on the railway:

> His drive, initiative, raw wit and histrionic talent combined with indomitable spirit were the ingredients which made him such a wonderful entrepreneur. His story deserves a place in the archives of Australian accomplishments in World War II.\(^v\)

At Chungkai, Britt produced all types of theatre. Most prized were the series of straight plays he produced in the fall of 1944 and early spring of 1945. Plays demand more rehearsal time with actors and careful attention to complex character and plot development. As a former actor, Britt was able to translate his stage experience into training and rehearsal procedures for his amateur performers and stage managers. Since there are numerous accounts in the POW literature about his theatrical productions, as well as his out-sized personality, coaching methods, and rehearsal techniques, it is the extraordinary Leo Britt who becomes the main focus of this chapter.

**“Maestro” Leo Britt**

According to his official Japanese locator card, Leo Ernest Britt was born on 27 March 1908 in Westminster, London, which would make him one of the older men among the thousands of other rank soldiers taken prisoner at Singapore. Prior to his capture, Britt had been a corporal in the Royal Army Service Corps serving in Malaya under Singapore Fortress Command. On his locator card he listed his pre-war occupation as “theatrical agent,” instead of actor, which may have been his attempt to avoid being singled out by the Japanese to serve their propaganda purposes as other POW actors had been.\(^vii\)

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\(^iv\) See Chapter 5: “The Tamarkan Players Present,” Chapter 6: “Chungkai Showcase,” and Chapter 12: “Jolly Good Show!” for examples of these high production values in staging.

\(^v\) With all lines memorized.

\(^vi\) To be fair, Carter was severely hampered at Tamarkan by the rehearsal restrictions placed on him by a hostile Japanese commandant (see Chapter 5: “The Tamarkan Players Present”), whereas, at Chungkai, Britt had the advantage of a commandant who strongly supported the POW entertainment.

\(^vii\) See Weary Dunlop’s diary about the fate of Australian actor Clephan “Tinkle” Bell on Java in 1942.
Prewar Resume

Before his enlistment, Leo Britt had been an actor in London’s West End theatre, albeit, according to Captain C. D. L. Aylwin, only in minor roles.\textsuperscript{10} What is known about his prewar acting resume is very sketchy. One show he performed in was André Charlot’s 1929 production of *Wonder Bar*.

![Poster for André Charlot’s Wonder Bar](image)

The show’s poster confirms that Britt was not one of the leads in the production. Terry Morris recalled that he was, instead, an actor-dancer in the show, performing “a tango specialty to the tune, ‘Tell me I’m forgiven.’”\textsuperscript{11}

When Britain declared war on Germany in 1939, Britt was in the touring production of Lupino and Eyton’s musical comedy *Runaway Love*.\textsuperscript{12} He enlisted in the Royal Army Service Corps, which was desperate for transport drivers and allowed men Britt’s age to join the unit. Like Fergus Anckorn and Denis East of the Optimists, who were also transport drivers, this position may have allowed him to perform in concert parties as well.

When Britt’s military unit arrived in Malaya is not known, but between 27 September and 11 October 1941 he appeared onstage at the Victoria Theatre in Singapore in Beryl Coles’ production of Barré Lyndon’s *The Amazing Dr. Clitterhouse* for a local theatre group known as “The Island Committee.”
Major Leofric Thorpe, stage manager for this production, was an important figure in the Island Committee organization, and it may have been Thorpe who recruited Britt, as he had other soldiers, for the group’s shows.

**POW Resume: Changi**

Because of his association with Thorpe, Britt was able to parlay his professional experience into a major role as producer with “The Southern Area Troops Central Concert Party” organized by Thorpe in the Singapore Fortress section of Changi POW camp soon after surrender. Here Britt would discover his métier as a producer-director.
At the same time as the concert party was getting organized and rehearsals for the first show were under way, Britt founded the E & O Green Room Club to promote activities of a theatrical nature. Besides Britt, the club had seven other founding members, five of whom would become well-known producers in the entertainment world of the Thailand-Burma railway.

Britt’s first production in Changi was the “new laughing revusical” Red, White, and Blue, which opened on 14 April 1942.

Each of the Southern Area shows ran for a month in order to allow all the local troops to see it on a unit rotation basis. For May, Britt produced Hellsabuzzin’, which Thorpe claimed was Britt’s rewrite of Runaway Love with topical references.

With this second show, the Southern Area Central Concert Party changed its name to the more appealing “Mumming Bees.”

When it became evident that one show a month would not fill the need for entertainment to keep morale up, Britt produced a small cast revue entitled Café Colette that toured Southern Area locations during the week. As the band leader in the show, he played a character called “Maestro,” and this became his moniker—one he preferred others use when addressing him.

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viii Eastern and Oriental Express—the famous railway line that still runs between Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and Bangkok, Thailand.
ix According to Thorpe, “The Green Room Club was really nothing more than a list which Leo made out of all who might have joined it. Though all those whom we could contact agreed that they were members, and this was most of them” [Thorpe, Letter to Laurie Allison, n.d.]. Miss Marie Ney, a British stage and film star who had recently been in Malaya, was designated as the club’s patron.
x These men represent different military units and/or concert parties: Bradshaw (18th Division’s New Windmill Players), McNaughton and Wood (A.I.F. Concert Party), Thorpe, Smith, and Harffey (Singapore Fortress Command’s Mumming Bees), and Nigel Wright (F.M.S.V.F.). On the reverse side of Leo Britt’s membership card are lists of fifteen professional and 109 amateur British, Australian, American, and Dutch/Indonesian “actors in the Far East” that more accurately should read “performers,” as some of these are names of musicians. This list must have been compiled by Britt in 1944, as it includes performers he knew on the Thailand-Burma railway as well as in Changi but excludes those he met in 1945. Among the notable omissions of men Britt must have known in Chungkai are the Englishman Dudley Gotla and the Dutch/Indonesian Philip Brugman.
Britt did not produce the Mumming Bees’ show for June. But he didn’t allow himself to be forgotten. On the back side of the program for that revue appeared an announcement for his upcoming production of *Wonder Bar*.

![Picture of wonder bar announcement](image)

Figure 13.7. Announcement for *Wonder Bar.*
Courtesy of John Pollock.

As the need for more and more entertainment spread throughout the vast populace of POWs, it was decided that Mumming Bees’ shows should run for two months instead of one so that POWs in other areas might see them as well. So Britt abandoned his plans for a production of *Wonder Bar* and produced, instead, another large-scale revue, *Pass the Nuts*, which would run for July and August.

During the infamous “Selarang Incident” in September, when the Japanese authorities herded all the “fit” Changi POWs into the Australians’ Selarang Barracks square to coerce them into signing a no-escape agreement, Britt delighted the thousands jammed into the square by mounting “a few ‘turns’ on the back of a farm cart” by Mumming Bees performers.\(^{15}\)

Afterwards, when Britt learned that he was among the Singapore Fortress POWs who were going to be sent to Thailand to construct a railway, he remounted his production of *Pass the Nuts* as the Mumming Bees’ farewell production. Britt left Changi for Thailand with other members of the concert party in early November.

**POW Resume: Thailand—Early Days**

Leo Britt’s first theatrical production in Thailand was *Rhythm on the River*, given at Chungkai on Christmas Day 1942. John Sharp attended the evening performance:

Went to concert at 7.30. Stage had been erected under a big tree in clearing. Audience on floor [ground]. Quite a good show. Orchestra of five with
“maestro,”\textsuperscript{xi} two female impersonators, two close harmonists, and a conjurer.\textsuperscript{xiii} Nips present appeared to enjoy show. Puss-in-boots\textsuperscript{xiii} said he did very much. Female impersonators well-dressed—brought small wardrobe from Changi. At 9 p.m. lights did not appear as arranged,\textsuperscript{xiv} and audience dispersed, but met lights as we returned, so reassembled and saw rest of show.\textsuperscript{xvi}

\textit{(Rhythm on the River} sounds very much like a variation on Britt’s earlier \textit{Café Colette} show.\textit{)}

Early in the new year, Britt was posted to the forward field hospital camp at Takanun, where his theatrical talents could be useful in keeping up the men’s morale.

\textbf{POW Resume: Chungkai Hospital Camp}

Leo Britt’s greatest success as a producer-director came after he arrived back in Chungkai from Takanun in the spring of 1944. One of his earliest triumphs was the production of the long-delayed \textit{Wonder Bar} in May 1944.

\textsuperscript{xii} The conjurer has been identified by the magician Fergus Anckorn—who was recovering in Chungkai at the time from the burns he received at Wampire—as a former Malayan planter by the name of Openshaw.

\textsuperscript{xiii} POW nickname for one of their Korean guards.

\textsuperscript{xiv} These were not electric lights but most likely kerosene pressure lamps borrowed from the Japanese.
This poster for Wonder Bar—an exact duplicate of the original for the West End production (see Figure 13.3), except that all the original actors have been replaced with Chungkai “stars”—could only have been devised by Britt, who knew both sets of performers.

With this production, Britt himself achieved “star” status. Ian Mackintosh was voicing the general sentiment in the camp regarding Britt when he declared, “This fellow Britt is obviously a genius.” His “genius” was also recognized by the Japanese commandant who relieved Britt of all other camp duties so he could plan and rehearse his productions. Laurie Allison observed the “maestro” luxuriating in his special status:

He would lay on the bamboo slats in his hut and would be writing on his clipboard and when a Jap sauntered through the hut, Leo would acknowledge his presence with a nod of his head. Unlike we mortals who, if we failed to jump up and bow or salute, would receive a vicious slap. I think it was the Japs’ way of paying tribute to an artist.

Between March 1944 and March 1945, Britt produced and directed fifteen different shows in Chungkai—shows that involved the whole range of theatrical forms, from pantomime to serious drama (more fully documented in Chapter 6: “Chungkai Showcase”). Many of these shows were performed by his “Chungkai Repertory Company,” which is examined later.

In February 1945, Britt was in final rehearsals with his sixteenth production, Sutton Vane’s Outward Bound, when a new Japanese camp commandant declared the theatre closed and ordered all the officers transferred to Kanburi. When the theatre was allowed to reopen under new restrictions preventing words from being spoken on stage, Britt volunteered for the next draft of workers for the new aerodrome.
construction camp at Kachu Mountain, where there were no such constraints.

For the next four months, Britt produced shows for the White Pagoda Players at Kachu Mountain. One of his first was *Outward Bound*, remounted with an all-new cast. But a changing Japanese command made it increasingly difficult for Britt to produce shows in Kachu Mountain. Following the third cancellation of his production of *Runaway Love*, Britt volunteered, along with a cadre of his performers, for transfer to Nakhon Nai, where he hoped opportunities might be better. There he produced further shows, one of which was Dudley Gotla’s victory concert *Hold That Thaiger*.

**Leo Britt Offstage**

Who was this man recognized by others as “the camp impresario”?\(^\text{20}\)\(^\text{20}\)

Many POWs commented on the presence of this unique and sometimes contentious “precious personality” in their midst. Parading around camp in his blue knit cap, camp-made clogs, and pink Jap-Happy, Britt displayed a commanding presence that turned some people off—mainly officers. One of his critics was Lieutenant Richard Sharp, who said of him, “tho’ a somewhat trying personality to deal with, [he] was an efficient producer.”\(^\text{21}\) Even one of his top actors, Hugh de Wardener, who admired him greatly, spoke of him as “not a very pleasant character”\(^\text{22}\) and “not a warm character,” but quickly went on to say that he was “totally dedicated to what he was doing in the theatre. There was no question about that.”\(^\text{23}\)

What non-theatre people didn’t understand was that Britt’s drive to present top-notch productions meant that he frequently had to badger others to get what he wanted, caging every scrap of the scarce resources (cardboard, mosquito netting, rice sacks, bamboo matting, etc.) to make sure his designers and technicians had the materials they needed so his productions would be the best.

But Australian producer Lieutenant Norman Carter understood immediately. He first met Britt soon after his transfer to Chungkai from Tamarkan at the beginning of 1944, when he went one day to
inspect the theatre:

I was trying out the [prop piano] pedals which actually worked, when a voice called: “You want something?” and I knew instinctively that I was in the presence of Private [sic] Leo Britt, Chungkai’s resident producer. In spite of his patched shorts and hand-knitted blue woolen beret, there was no mistaking his profession. I could picture Mr. Britt in a morning coat and striped pants lounging in an armchair at the Green Room Club flipping over the pages of a new play, while the sweating author sat opposite waiting for the verdict: “Sorry, old boy, it simply doesn’t appeal.”

As I introduced myself he gave me a look which implied, “How did you get past the stage doorkeeper,” and then said icily: “Oh, yes . . . You’ve been putting on a few concerts at Tamarkan.” Concerts! Resisting the urge to slap him down, I asked mildly if I could look over the theatre and again I got that suspicious glare. Mr. Britt was antagonistic, not to me personally, but because he could sniff opposition—a rival cockerel who at any minute would start flapping his wings and crowing. I could see him chewing over my request and I chuckled inwardly for I knew exactly what his reply would be—“Sorry, I’m a little busy just now.”

I did not blame him. To Mr. Britt I was another Hank Bretano,xv trying to horn in on the delightful theatre which would never have reached such a pitch of excellence without his professional knowledge.xvi

Graphic artist Geoffrey Gee, who had the task of creating posters for “the Maestro’s” shows at Chungkai, left three brief diary accounts of his meetings with Britt that provide further insight into Britt’s personality and relationships with other people:

19 June ’44. Whilst there [at the box office] in the afternoon seeing Mr. Thwaites [regarding posters for upcoming shows], I met the amazing Leo (Britt) for the first time and came under his influence!

24 September ’44. Box-office, noon, for dope for next poster “The Amazing Dr. Clitterhouse” and saw Leo Britt’s scrapbook whilst I was there.xxxi

24 October ’44. Box Office. Small poster for “Youth at the Helm” for publicity. Leo came down but didn’t like it too much—“Not the same colours as used in the London advertising!” Ha! Ha!

When they first met, Lieutenant John Coast and Corporal Leo Britt “instinctively disliked one

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xv An American who usurped Carter’s position as producer in Bicycle Camp, Java, with shows of his own.

xvi Like most theatre people, Britt kept a scrapbook that contained copies of show posters, photographs, and clippings of reviews of shows he had appeared in. John Cosford noted that the female impersonator Bobby Spong did the same: “He kept a folder of ‘cuttings’ which told of his appearances on stage and for every show made out a programme with his own name on top of the bill” [Cosford, 104].
another,” and Coast couldn’t understand why Britt wanted him to be his assistant stage manager. But Britt knew a good stage manager when he saw one and wasn’t about to let his personal likes or dislikes stand in the way.

Coast’s description of a theatre committee meeting gives us another snapshot of Leo Britt’s behavior offstage: “Leo always had some objective or other, and we’d wait patiently for the clouds to disperse until he eventually came to his point, and then the argument would commence.”

But these are views of Britt from people who had to deal with him about theatrical matters—matters in which the quality of his productions were at stake and, thus, relationships in which Britt believed he had to assert his authority as a “professional.” A very different opinion of Britt comes from the musician Tom Boardman, who got to know him more personally at Kachu Mountain. “Leo Britt became our friend,” he wrote.

And offstage, he was a different man, really. If you went in [his hut], he was just like one of the lads, when you went in the hut where we was billeted. . . . And he just gonna chat like we’re chatting now, that thing sorta. I mean the profession of acting was rarely mentioned. You talked about every other thing.

It was Coast who summed up the POWs’ response to Britt: “His friends said that he was a genuine artist, a great asset to the camp, and his temperament, unavoidable; his enemies called him an egotistical fellow of little depth; and the Theatre attitude was to ignore his temperament, and let him get on with producing.”

Britt: The Producer-Director

Acting Coach

Since most of Britt’s actors were new to theatre (although some had amateur experience), he was faced with the formidable task of training these men in the mysteries of acting as well as directing them in a show. Leofric Thorpe believed Britt “was remarkable at teaching amateurs.” An added complication was the fact that many of these actors were officers. In the hidebound hierarchical military where one’s rank, and thus one’s status, was everything, a corporal telling a captain or major what to do could be seen as insubordination and grounds for being put on a charge—and possibly a court martial.

For years the tradition in the British military had been that when officers and other ranks worked together in a concert party, rank was to make no difference, only talent. Not everyone outside the concert parties understood this tradition or could deal with it, but Britt’s adherence to that principle was complete. To illustrate this point, Ancorn gave voice to Britt’s unstated behavior: “I am the Producer, and you may be an Officer, but I’m Leo Britt.”

Two men observed Britt in his role as acting coach dealing with this problem—as well as others—in his handling of untrained actors. One was Tom Boardman, who watched Britt’s rehearsals at Kachu Mountain:
He would take the officer class of actor under his wing and really dominate them. He was a dominating character. Knew what he wanted. If they couldn't do it, he'd show them how to do it and and how he wanted it to be done, shall I say. And in the end, he finished up with some really professional shows. . . . He brought out to the novice, as you were, a perfectional [sic] standard. He was really brilliant, in my opinion. . . . He knew if they weren't playing it as he thought it should be played, he wouldn't hesitate and say, “Oh, no, no, no, no, not that way! No, do it this way,” you know. And he brought out the best in people.33

To illustrate what he was talking about, Boardman described one telling moment he witnessed during a rehearsal:

But I remember watching—it seemed a bit stupid really. One of these plays . . . a chap would have to get out of bed and get dressed, and he had virtually forgotten how to get dressed. And Leo [Britt] would say, “Here you go, you put your trousers on, you tuck your shirt in, and all that . . . on like that”—[Leo] had to show him how to go through the routine of getting out of bed and getting dressed, 'cause he'd virtually forgotten. . . . He was only expected to do it in mime. He hadn't any trousers to put on [laughs]; no shirt to put on. But [Britt] had to go through it with him to show him what he wanted on that.34

But even Boardman had to admit, “Some [actors] could not accept his demand for high quality and, of course, fell by the wayside.”35

The other observer was Lieutenant-Colonel Selby Milner at Chungkai. As a non-theatre person, he had become fascinated with the whole theatrical enterprise:

[Britt] is a hard-working, cheerful and enthusiastic fellow and to see him at the rehearsals in the forest, as I did once or twice, gave me a very good idea of his personality. He was often at it from just after breakfast, often until after supper time with short pauses for lunch and tea. He seemed to know the whole thing off by heart, and was all the time exercising tact in controlling his leading players (some of whom he says get rather temperamental after one or two appearances on the stage) and exercising the force of his personality to put some drive into the rather less expert material in the smaller parts. In this way he was to be seen sometimes standing in the front of the rehearsal stage controlling all the players, and sometimes standing beside one of them and singing a song or doing a dance with him. He was in fact the driving force behind the whole business.36
From Rehearsal to Performance

More detailed information regarding Britt’s actor coaching and rehearsal procedures comes from cast members.

First Rehearsals

“To be directed by Leo Brit,” said Hugh de Wardener “was quite something, particularly at first. . . I remember the first reading.”

At first we were all sort of automatons, you know. But by the third, fourth, or fifth play that you were involved in, the first reading was exciting.

I mean Leo Britt would say, “You’re going to be this. And you’re that. And I want you to be this, that, and the other, fine.” Gives us the general tone to these various [scenes] and people. And then, boom, you’re in. Straightaway!

Norman Carter, who was cast by Britt as the old woman in Outward Bound, recalled the first rehearsal with the cast on its feet moving around in the outline of the set marked out on the ground with whitewashed stones:

Conducted in an almost ecclesiastical atmosphere, that first rehearsal was an eye-opener. No standing to attention while a funeral cortège passed, no dodging behind tattered sacking when the guard suddenly appeared. Only the quiet voice of the producer: “I think the emphasis should be on this line, would you mind taking that scene again, please? A longer pause before you come down stage.” By the end of the week Outward Bound was taking shape. Each rehearsal became more enjoyable and I understood why people like Charles Faulder let Britt have his temperamental head. He really knew his stuff.

Rumors about Leo Britt the perfectionist director and his rehearsals became the stuff of camp legend. “Like so many great producers he took charge of everything and everyone,” wrote John Durnford. “Rehearsals, I was told, contained every detail of an authentic production, including scenes of temperament, tears and outbursts that would have done credit to the legitimate stage.”

Shooting Stars: A Case Study

When John Coast first became Leo Britt’s ASM in Chungkai, Britt had to explain to the theatre novice what the duties of this important position entailed: “What was the A.S.M.? The Assistant Stage Manager, of course, and he had to hold the book, attend all rehearsals, arrange the calls, work between the Producer and the Theatre Staff, and prompt—would I be prepared to take it over? Yes, right—I’d try. We

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xvii Normal procedures by other producers and casts during a rehearsal.
xviii Medical Officer Charles Faulder was one of the regulars in Britt’s acting company.
Coast’s initiation as ASM on the production of *Shooting Stars* provides the most detailed record of Britt’s rehearsals practices. His observations reveal the professional standards Britt constantly worked to instill in his actors and staff.

Most rehearsals are about the same, so we’ll just look in at one in the “Bamboo Theatre” called for 10 o’clock one morning. Seated on a stool marked “Leo Britt” is the great producer, wearing a pair of clompers, sun-glasses, a pink “Jap-Happy,” and a knitted dark blue skullcap. Seated at his side, on a smaller and anonymous stool, is the A.S.M. Hung up on a bamboo thorn is the Call Board, showing all the “Calls” the various actors are due to make that and the following day. This rehearsal is for 10 o’clock, followed by two others. At five minutes to ten, Leo starts fidgeting, and walking up and down, saying nothing for a few minutes, and then suddenly he calls me over. “John,” he says, “do go and see if you can find Bobby, will you? And then there’s Bill [Pycock] and René [Den Daas] not here, either; we can never start until the whole cast is here—will you look in the cookhouse and see if you can drag them out?” “O.K., Leo!” The first week I walked many miles “calling” people who were so sorry they hadn’t seen the Call Board, but in the end we made it their responsibility to go and look at the board daily.

Given these rehearsal calls, Britt must have had some agreement with the I. J. A. through POW camp headquarters that when his actors were called for a rehearsal during the day, they could be temporarily excused from their light duties.

When all the cast are present who look like turning up that day, we start, and begin with the opening scene—a queue of theatre-goers in London being entertained by buskers while it waits for the “stars” at the stage door, hoping to collect autographs; when these long-awaited people at last appear, they are kidnapped, complete with the band, in a stolen bus and taken on board a gangster’s yacht. Leo has to be very patient, and lines and actions are repeated over and over again, the producer demonstrating what he wants, and trying to interpret for those who are reading their lines un-understandingly, what the words are meant to mean. After about an hour everyone has had enough; the A.S.M. has followed the script all the while, and noted down various instructions—for it seems the A.S.M. holds the baby as well as the book! For three weeks we have anything up to four rehearsals a day, and

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*xx With paper hard to come by, each actor had, perhaps, only been given his “side”—those pages on which his character’s dialogue appears. In an extreme situation when the paper for “sides” was not available, the lines would be read by the ASM and repeated by the actor until he memorized them.

*xx The ASM is the only one present with the full text from which to prompt the actors and is responsible for noting down all the “blocking” (movement) determined by the director and keeping notes regarding any additional sets, props, costumes, or lighting concerns that need to be communicated to the designers and technical staff. The ASM does, indeed, hold the baby!
everyone is driven hard by the quality producer, and it’s obvious that if the show
is a success it’s purely due to Leo’s terrific personal efforts.⁴²

Hugh de Wardener remembered that Britt’s “rallying cry at rehearsals was ‘GIVE, GIVE.’ And ‘give’ we did.”⁴¹

Three weeks with four rehearsals a day would have been as intense as that for a professional production back in England. From Tom Boardman’s perspective, Britt “really thought he was producing ‘West End’ shows.”⁴⁴

During the fourth week, rehearsals moved to the theatre so the actors could adjust to the actual space and the director could gain perspective on his show by watching it from a distance in the auditorium. The fifth and final week of rehearsals involved technical and dress rehearsals on stage.

Eventually, there was the flurry and excitement of opening night:

Then comes the first night. “The Curtain goes up at 8:30—call the cast for seven p.m., please, Mr. A.S.M.” At seven p.m., more or less punctually, the cast begins to assemble back stage. I have malaria again, with a high temperature, but the heat should sweat the fever out as we go along. Leo is a little anxious about me—I fear only because no-one else is quite sure how to set the different scenes and distribute the hand-props. The actors are first of all made up by the ex-Hollywood make-up man, xxiii and they then cross over to the Wardrobe for their clothes.

Bobby, the leading lady, has a wardrobe of his own, including scanties which he has made himself. You see him now made-up and patting his hair, walking up and down in a pair of light blue silk panties, looking at himself in the mirror. xxiv In another corner the Camps R.S.M., Sandy Munnoch, with a very beery complexion, is striving to get into a commissionaire’s uniform—a converted Dutch tunic! xxv⁴⁵

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xxi The head barber, who had been a makeup artist for Max Factor in Hollywood.
xxii Bobby Spong carried such ladies undergarments with him to Thailand from Singapore.
xxiii This section has been re-paragraphed from the original for better readability.
Flip Relf's sketch of actors getting ready backstage for a show at Tamarkan is remarkably similar to the scene Coast described.

At eight o'clock Leo sings out, “Call the Half, Mr. A.S.M.” I consult the pundits, and then bellow, “Half an hour to go, please gentlemen!” “No, no! It’s not necessary to say ‘please gentlemen’; in theatre etiquette you merely say ‘Half an Hour!’” “O.K., Half an Hour!” Then there’s the Quarter, the Beginners, Please! And the orchestra of about 20 instruments, led by the vast Norman Smith, its conductor, goes down to the orchestra-pit.

Although Alec Knight is called Stage Manager, he is, in effect, the Theatre General Manager—Leo referred to him as the “chief carpenter”—and the S.M.’s job of setting the stage is done solely by me, and from the moment the curtain went up, theoretically I was in charge. So now, the stage is set. Leo inspects it and touches it up, passes it, and the overture starts.

Coast later confessed, “To this day, Leo doesn’t know that in the Board of Directors scene, where they are meeting to consider the ransom note, I had left two life-belts from the previous yacht scene still

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xxiv In his text, Coast uses the pseudonym Norman “Broad” for “Smith.” Smith was a large (“vast”) man.
xxv A very important clarification. Perhaps a better term these days would be Production Manager.
hung up on the walls.”

Leo Britt’s demand for professional standards from his actors and production staff spilled over to his expectations of the audience as well. Theatregoers attending Shooting Stars were greeted with the following sign:

![Figure 13.13. Audience announcement. Image copyright Museum, The Hague, Netherlands.](image)

Though Britt’s productions, audiences learned to demand the best from their entertainers. Their responses to his productions are detailed in Chapter 6: “Chungkai Showcase.”

**The Chungkai Repertory Company**

Following his success with the mystery-thriller Night Must Fall in June 1944 and The Amazing Dr. Clitterhouse in September, Britt embarked on a new and ambitious venture. He would gather together a select group of actors and train them in the techniques of acting and stagecraft to form his “Chungkai Repertory Company.” The productions by this group would be Britt’s supreme achievement as a producer-director on the Thailand-Burma railway.

Custance Baker, who played female roles in this group, kept a diary in which he kept extensive notes on the company’s formation, training, and repertoire, allowing us an ‘insiders’ view on their activities.

The autumn and winter of 1944 was the period of Leo Britt’s main activity and this troupe considered themselves as the Chungkai Repertory Company. We often had two or three shows in preparation at once. Word rehearsals in the morning, stage in the afternoon and show in the evening.

The parts of the plays were either copied out from books, which we happened to have in the camp, or more often written down by someone who knew the play well from having acted in it or produced it before the war.

One of these people was Leofric Thorpe, who took over as ASM after Britt’s breakup with Coast in October 1944.

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**Footnotes:**

xxvi Not exactly accurate, but Baker had been ill with malaria through much of the earlier part of the year.

xxvii Coast had outwitted Britt in obtaining costume, set, and lighting materials for his own show, On Your Toes: see the details of this dustup in Chapter 6: “Chungkai Showcase,” Part Two.
“Tricks of the Trade”

As part of the training regimen, Britt introduced his actors to traditional stagecraft techniques.\textsuperscript{xxviii} Custance Baker elaborated:

Leo taught us odds bits of stagecraft. You must always take hold of a doorknob with the hand on the hinge side so that you can open the door, walk through and close it in one movement. If you seize the knob with the other hand you have to change hands halfway through your entrance or exit.

The prompter, or “Man on the book,” always sits just behind the curtain on the front corner of the stage on the left side, actors left. This is the prompt side; the other side is the O.P. [Opposite Prompt]. When you feel anxious about forgetting your lines, you work your way towards the prompt corner so that he can whisper the words to you before you actually dry. In a small friendly Company like ours other actors can often foresee trouble coming and feed you the lines before you dry.

(This is exactly what happened to Baker in \textit{Hay Fever}. “On the second night I almost dried but one of the cast fed me my words so that I did not have to take a prompt.”\textsuperscript{49})

Stages, Chungkai included, are built on a slight slope so that the audience in the pit or the stalls can see the whole of the stage surface. The back is “up stage” and the front by the foot lights is “down stage.” If two actors are having a dialogue they should stand level with one another so that each can show a three quarters face to the audience and yet still appear to be speaking to one another. The attention of the audience is thus drawn equally to both of them. If one of them works his way up stage he then faces the audience and gains their full attention whereas the other actor is obliged to turn his back on the audience if the dialogue is to continue, and thus loses their full attention. Hence the common phrase “To upstage someone.” A naughty trick, but practiced sometimes by even the nicest people.\textsuperscript{50}

Hugh de Wardener was able to supply one more example of Leo’s “theatrical tricks of the trade. I remember one to underline indecision. He suggested that you look down and move the toe of one foot [back and forth] across the floor slowly.”\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{xxviii} Lessons in stagecraft that used to be taught to beginning actors in professional schools.
The Repertoire


The Chungkai Repertory Company’s first show was Youth at the Helm in mid-November, followed two weeks later by Accent on Youth. Even Coast had to acknowledge Britt’s brilliant accomplishments not only with the level of the acting achieved but with the way Britt pushed his designers and technicians to greater heights.52

Baker’s reminiscences about the Chungkai Rep continue:

Towards the end of 1944 Leo did nearly all the showsxxx and we, his troupe, were kept busy indeed. He did share out the casting so that no one had two long parts going on at once. He always had a wide choice of hopeful actors who wanted to get into the Company, as we were never detailed for upriver maintenance parties.xxxi

xxix Baker’s memories are not always accurate, and the order of the shows mentioned is associative and not chronological.
xxx The railway maintenance parties were almost seen as a death sentence. Staying off the drafts for these parties was essential.
After a production of Noel Coward’s *Hay Fever* in mid-December, the repertory company presented the pantomime *Cinderella* (in which Baker played the Fairy Godmother) for Christmas 1944. Britt believed the story would now hold special significance for the POWs.

Even in 1942 we had maintained the belief that we would eventually win, but it was rather a loyal duty to believe that, but now all the indications were in our favour and this news raised the spirits of all the POWs even the thousand or more in the Sick Huts. So our next performance, *Cinderella*, was presented in an atmosphere of hope and confidence, and it was in fact the happiest show that Britt put on . . . I believe we ran for six nights, so that everyone could see it and it was very well received.54

For January, the rep’s show was George Bernard Shaw’s *Major Barbara*. Britt must have been very proud to know he had trained his company to the point where they could present this difficult comedy of ideas.55 In the audience for one of the performances was Captain C. D. L. Aylwin, who wrote of the production, “It was well up to standard and enthralled me.”56

The company was in rehearsal with Sutton Vane’s fantasy, *Outward Bound*—the play scheduled for February—when an emergency arose and Britt stepped in to save the day:

I remember one of Britt’s quite spectacular triumphs. A stage play in rehearsal by another company was due to start on the next Monday, but on the previous Thursday or Friday the male lead went sick with no understudy so the show was cancelled leaving the prospect of a dark stage for a week.
Leo put together a musical show made up of bits from *Merry Widow*, *Poet and Peasant*, *Bittersweet* (in which I play one of the tarts in the café scene who sings the song Ladies of the Town) and other operettas, and an almost non-existent story of boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy finds girl. The words for the song were written in large letters on the back of the fly borders or on the edges of the wings. The speaking parts were held by the actors in their hats or on the back of fans for the ladies. Leo made up the dances as he went along, much helped by Nellie Wallace, who had probably been a chorus boy in peacetime. … We rehearsed all day over the weekend while stage hands painted scenery and put the words up on the borders so that a show did go on as promised and there was no dark stage.\(^57\)

Britt’s production of *Outward Bound* was aborted when all theater operations were suddenly closed down and the officers sent to Kanburi Officers’ Camp. Baker was just as glad. He found the script of *Outward Bound*, with its cast of recently deceased characters sailing to an unknown fate, very disturbing: “I don’t think the audience would have liked it so perhaps it was just as well it was never put on.”\(^58\)

**“The Outstanding Driving Force”**

With his brilliant theatrical productions, Leo Britt became the most celebrated producer on the Thailand-Burma railway. Four former POWs, three of whom worked closely with him, summed up what they thought Leo Britt and his shows had accomplished at Chungkai.

Terry Morris praised Britt as a “man with quite extraordinary talent.”\(^59\) He went on to write, “In
my general assessment Leo Britt was the outstanding driving force behind the whole [POW entertainment] exercise. . . . Certainly his powers of direction & production single him out.\textsuperscript{60}

Captain Aylwin had to agree:

An extraordinary high standard of acting and production had been obtained. Such ambitious plays as “The Amazing Dr. Clitherhouse” [sic], “Youth at the Helm” and many another London show had been put on while I had been up country at Kinsayook [sic]. Most of them written from memory. The improvisation of décor and dresses had to be seen to be believed. With only coconut oil lamps, lighting effects were produced to rival any provincial and perhaps even London theatre and the coloured dresses made from mosquito nets and rice sacks were amazing. The leading light behind all this was Leo Britt a L/G1. in the R.A.S.C. . . . He certainly produced the goods and gave us many an hour of fine entertainment.\textsuperscript{61}

John Coast, who had a complex and sometimes stormy relationship with Britt, still granted Britt and his work the highest accolades: “But in spite of any personal likes or dislikes, everybody had to hand it to Leo because he put on the highest standard of steady entertainment seen in any camp in Thailand . . . and he worked himself untiringly and unceasingly, expecting everyone else to do the same.”\textsuperscript{62} Britts demands for professional standards onstage and off transformed the theatre at Chungkai into the most polished and professional performance venue on the railway.

Hugh de Wardener concluded: “Without Leo Britt, things [life as a POW] would not have been as good as they were; there’s no question about it. He should have had a medal for that.”\textsuperscript{63} But no official recognition was ever granted him.

Endnotes

1 Cosford, 110.
2 Peacock, 224.
3 Peacock, 224.
4 Richard Sharp, 50.
5 Pritchard, “the undefeated.” 3.
6 Anckorn, Interview, 46-48.
7 Anckorn, Interview, 46-48.
10 Aylwin, 3.
13 Information taken from poster, D. W. Jenkins Papers, IWM 65/144/1.

\textsuperscript{xxxi} De Wardener himself was awarded an MBE (Member of the Order of the British Empire) for his unselfish work with cholera patients at Tamarkan.
John Sharp, Diary, 12 December 1942.
Mackintosh, Diary, 23 May 1944.
Owtram, 104.
Allison, Begone Dull Care, 96–97.
John Sharp, Diary, 19 February 1944.
Richard Sharp, Unpublished memoir, 50.
De Wardener, Interview, 23.
De Wardener, E-mail, 2 March 2011.
Carter, 179–180.
Gee, Diary.
Coast, 175.
Coast, 179–180.
Tom Boardman, “Questionnaire,” 1–2.
Tom Boardman, Interview, 60.
Coast, 175.
Thorpe, Interview, 27.
Anckorn, Interview, 29.
Tom Boardman, Interview, 60.
Tom Boardman, Interview, 59.
Tom Boardman, “Questionnaire,” 1–2.
Milner, Diary, 21 May 1944.
De Wardener, Interview, 24–25.
Carter, 182.
Durnford, 147.
Coast, 174.
Coast, 176.
Coast, 176–177.
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Tom Boardman, “Questionnaire,” 1–2.
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Aylwin, 1945 Folder, 3.
Terry Morris, Self-Interview #1, 4.
Aylwin, 1945 Folder, 3.
Coast, 175.
De Wardener, Interview, 31–32.