

Preserving Human Stories on Theatrecrafts

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Many of you reading this will have stories about your work on shows, and people you've worked with, many of these stories are fascinating and I'd like to preserve as many as possible as part of the Backstage Heritage Collection. So, please fill in the Contact Us form on Theatrecrafts.com and I'll be in touch.

I'm hoping to do some recordings at the PLASA show in September (on the Classic Gear Live stand) and also to offer recording slots at the National Theatre foyer some weekends during October. Some of these interviews may result in podcast episodes (as happened with Production Electrician Gerry Amies last year), others will be recorded for reference and either typed up, or retained as a recorded interview and made available on the website.

You can also just send in memories or corrections to the information I already have on the Archive part of the website – these anecdotes can also be added to the database and linked to shows or equipment.

One great example is the story of Jack Croxford, I met his son Martin and was able to explore a huge amount of written information, which brought his story to life.

Jack was born in December 1897 in Bethnal Green. In 1906, aged nine, he received an award from school for 'general proficiency' a copy of a book called 'Sunshine and Snow', which, is 'an engaging adventure novel set in the rugged Canadian wilderness.' At 13, Jack came across a newspaper advert: "Wanted – A lad for farm in Western Canada. Must be able to Ride, Drive and Milk". He was besotted with the idea. He got some money together to take a train to London to meet the agent who'd



placed the advert and was disappointed that he couldn't be sent abroad without finishing school and getting his parents' permission. The journey back took a full day, on a series of horse-drawn buses. Next year, he passed the Labour Examination, to secure an early release from school (to prove he was ready for work, aged 14). The next months were spent learning ploughing, milking, horse-riding and being a golf caddy and he learned to box. Another trip to London resulted in formally signing up for the next work opportunity. In April 1912, the letter came and Jack was on the boat, with all his belongings in a tin trunk. After a rough ten days at sea, he arrived in Montreal and took a five day train journey to Dubuc, Saskatchewan (population 200); so remote that there was no train station: he had to jump down from the train. At the start of WWI, he joined the Canadian cavalry and was involved in the Battle of the Somme in 1916, and was part of the Canadian Corps which recaptured Passchendale in 1917.

Returning from the war, Jack started a window cleaning business and while working on an expensive property in London, put his arm through a window pane, the grateful owner gave him £100 to learn a trade in gratitude for not bleeding on his expensive carpet. He chose electricity. He got a job with Strand Electric and worked alongside Stanley Earnshaw, Jack Madre and Lew Burroughs. He then got a job as electrician at the Covent Garden Opera House, eventually becoming Chief Electrician for 21 years, responsible for the largest theatre lighting installation at the time and created the lighting for the last pantomime at the Opera House, Red Riding Hood in 1938/39. He also was seconded to light the 1938 Ideal Home Exhibition in Olympia. In 1939, the Opera House was in bad financial shape. Jack's team offered to man searchlights on the roof to aid spotting enemy planes. A lease was sold to Mecca Dancing to use the building as a dance hall giving war ravaged Londoners somewhere to go. Jack became

Photo - Jack Croxford (left) aged 14 in Dubuc, Saskatchewan

Photo - Scraping the gum, with Jack Croxford in the background (photo scan by Dorian Kelly, 2003)



Chief Engineer working for Mecca Dancing. Mecca offered £100 to anyone who could come up with a way of removing chewing gum from the carpets and Jack invented an electrically heated scraper which solved the problem elegantly.

After the war, the dance hall was moved to the Lyceum Theatre, creating the Lyceum Ballroom and Jack decided to recycle Morrison air raid shelters to provide a strong wooden frame on which to build the dance floor. The Ballroom was in operation until 1985 when it became a theatre again for the National Theatres' production of *The Mysteries* (transferred from the Cottesloe).

Age 59, Jack fell out with Eric Morley and left Mecca to run the electrical installation for the Jaywick holiday park. Aged 70, he decided to move back to Canada for a year, to gain his pension from the Canadian military, on his return to the UK Jack was taken ill and died in 1969.

You can read more about him, and see his collection of photographs at <https://theatre crafts.com/pages/home/archive/people/jack-croxford/>

Artificially Intelligent

Just before I close, an apology if you've tried to access the website and run into a blank screen. I'm facing a daily battle with bots and AI services 'trawling' the website.

Assistive AI (which enables the speedy bulk analysis of data, pattern recognition etc, will hopefully provide huge medical advances) is of course a positive aid for humanity. The issue I have is with Generative AI, where text, images and video are generated as a reply to a 'prompt', which gives the AI its task. Tools such as ChatGPT, Microsoft Copilot and Google Gemini rely on existing information on websites such as Theatre crafts.com to find information to make them look all-knowing. And if they don't find the answer they invent something which sounds plausible. For example, I've tried looking for references about obscure electrical manufacturers of the early 20th century, to be told that they don't exist. If the AI hasn't found the information itself, it doesn't exist. The same will be applied to creative endeavours. The AI systems can create a script for something which looks like a play. It can write a programme note about a writer. But all it's doing is pulling together text from web searches held together with something which it believes is correct grammar. It's not making an argument or creating a world, it's only a poor-quality sketch of human endeavour.



Photo - Jack Croxford with Strand Electric Magnetic Clutch Lighting Control (photo scan by Dorian Kelly, 2003)jp

It's the same with creating imagery. The technology is impressive, but it's stitching together existing human-created material copying a human-created style, with added hallucinations. Many theatres seem to be using AI to create poster artwork and projected media. However, the best posters (e.g. *Cats*, *Operation Mincemeat*, *Les Misérables*, *The Phantom of the Opera*) use a single idea: a strong image and colour choice along with an appropriate font for the text. At the moment, it's fairly easy to spot AI-generated work and audiences can see it. Will theatres be adding a splash across posters in the future '100% Human'? Can an AI create a West End or Broadway hit? Can it write a panto? Can it replicate or comment on the human experience without ever experiencing it?

If the AI craziness continues for much longer, the 'live' experience (and the 'lived' experience) will become highly prized. Humans will want to gather in darkened rooms and tell each other stories. And I look forward to a time when live theatre remains one of the truly human creative industries and although LED screens and video content look impressive right now, there will be a time when we decide we'd prefer to just see things that exist in front of us in the moment, as we know it's true, real and can be trusted.

Suggestions welcome for how I can make the Theatre crafts website easier to find what you are looking for, so we can all stem the flow of generative AI.

Please get in touch via the Theatre crafts.com website 'Contact Us' form if you can help in any way.

Sightline

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