

Gladys Short, Forever Theatrical

Gladys Short trotted onto the stage at the Clacton-on-Sea Theater in Essex, England wearing slippers and a satin gown two sizes too small. Her teeth were blacked out and her blond hair was teased with hairspray. She carried a tin watering can.

"Oh, the flowers, the beautiful flowers. I must water the beautiful flowers," Short chanted. No flowers were on stage. A sick man lay in a bed nearby. Short stopped and looked at him. "I must water this flower!" She shouted. She poured water on the man. He jumped up and chased Short off the stage.

Fifty-four years later, Short sits at a kitchen table in Cincinnati, Ohio. She jumps out of her chair in excitement to show me the skit. She trots across the kitchen floor laughing as she recalls how crazy she looked. Short reenacts the entire routine, not forgetting one word.

"I played a damn good mad woman," said Short.

Short was born on November 12, 1935 in Manchester, England. During her childhood, Germany bombed London, leaving the city almost in ruins. Short remembers all of the families in her neighborhood running to the bomb shelters, which were built into the cobblestone of the streets.

Performing was always in the Short family's blood. Her grandmother, Florence Howard, performed in the theater until she met her husband. And, her mother, Gladys Hannah, performed in a troupe until school ended when she was 16. She wanted to move to London to continue performing, but her father did not let her. He needed her to get a job instead.

"Everyone described my mother as a contortionist. They said she was unbelievable," said Short.

At age 10, Short started dance classes taught by a 60 year-old man who wore a tie as a belt. The classes were held in a studio on the floor above the neighborhood grocery store. She also started one-on-one singing lessons with an old, stern woman.

After a year, Short was hired for the role of Boy Babe in the Christmas pantomime, *Babes in the Woods*. Pantomimes are shows based off of children's books,

which are still popular in England today. Every week from mid-November to mid-January, Short and the rest of the cast traveled to different theaters throughout the United Kingdom and performed for audiences comprised of children and their parents.

"We really made the book come alive," said Short.

Short performed in several more pantomimes, including Little Red Riding Hood and Cinderella, and at age 16, instead of finding work as a secretary or a nurse like the other women her age, Short decided to move to London.

"All the kids [in the pantomimes] had starry eyes to go to London. I just could not wait to get out of school and do just that," said Short.

Short found an agent named Sparky through an ad in the newspaper. Sparky, a 65-year-old fireplug, took Short under her wing and found her a room to stay in at the theatrical girls club located on Shaftesbury Avenue, right down the street from the London Palladium, which is the main musical theater in London.

The theatrical girls club was a boarding house for about 25 young women auditioning for jobs in the theater world. Audition notices were posted on the bulletin board in the entrance way and in the newspapers. Every day, Short heard women in the halls exercising their vocals, preparing for an audition that day.

Short did not have to audition like the other women. Sparky already got her a role as a chorus member in a revue called A Peasant from Paris. A revue is a lot like a variety show in that it is made up of skits, dances and songs. The cast includes comedians, crooners, ballet and tap dancers, and acrobats, just to name a few. The only difference is that revues have themes and variety shows do not.

In one scene, Short and six other girls lined up next to each other wearing gypsy costumes and ballet shoes and holding a tambourine in their right hand. Synchronically, each girl kicked high enough to hit the girl's standing next to them tambourine in rhythm with the orchestra.

"You could always tell who the ballet dancers were. They kicked the highest and their legs stayed the straightest," said Short.

The revue, A Peasant from Paris, lasted several months and was performed at theaters all over the United Kingdom. Not everyone involved in the revue traveled with

the revue. Only the cast, costume manager, scene manager, lead choreographer, the conductor of the orchestra, the producer and a few others lived out of suitcases and traveled to every city by train. Every theater had their own staff including a backstage manager and crew members, and an orchestra.

Along with revues, Short performed in floor-show cabarets, which were one-night performances that took place at restaurants. During one cabaret, Short and seven other girls did the can-can around the tables that the customers ate at.

Short also performed in variety shows, which consisted of all different acts including one-wheel cyclists, acrobats, and comedians. In her first variety show, she sang "Bewitched" by herself. But what she was most famous for was being a member of the Melody Maids, Made for Melody. Short and three other girls were known for their dancing and strong, harmonious melodies. Short and another girl in the group were just singers who did small dance routines. The other two girls, however, did ballet and acrobatics.

Short was considered an "all-rounder," which meant that she could do whatever was required of her. She could do any type of dancing; she could sing; and she could act. To save money, instead of hiring a new cast member for a skit, the producers of the variety shows would use Short.

One time, in between scenes, Short, wearing a pink button-up short-sleeved dress, caressed a young man in a suit on a couch with the spotlight directly on them. The curtain was closed behind them as the stage crew prepared for the next scene. Another man in a suit walked onto the stage.

"Honey! I'm home!" the man yelled.

The young man Short was kissing jumped behind the couch, but it was too late, her husband saw him. He yanks the man out by his overcoat and pushes him off stage. Her husband then chases Short off the stage.

Short's most memorable performances were at the Clacton-on-Sea, which was a theater on a pier in Essex, England. Short performed in a six-week revue that did not tour from city to city; it remained only at Clacton-on-Sea. The revue consisted of two different shows per week and a different concert every Sunday. No guest on holiday wanted to see the same show twice, which is why the shows were rotated; to keep them coming back.

Petula Clark, who is in the Guinness Book of World Records for being the most successful British female solo recording artist, sang at one of the Sunday concerts. Short was in the chorus, which consisted of six girls, while she sang.

Short and the other chorus girls wore leotards and very sheer butterfly wings. Two wooden sticks were attached to the wings which allowed the girls to hold on and flap them. The girls danced on stage, gliding in and out of each other.

"As you passed in front of another girl, they would whisper, 'Hey watch your wings.' You had to be careful not to hit anyone, but it was hard not to because the wings were so big," said Short. She laughed as she bent over, pretending to flap her wings and glide in front of another chorus girl.

Short only got nervous on opening nights. Each show got easier as the weeks went on.

"You can't go into the theater if you aren't spunky. You can't be afraid to be in front of a lot of people or worry about what bad things could happen," said Short.

Once, Short was performing in a chorus line with eight girls; all wearing a tight, white blouse and a navy blue skirt barely covering their behinds. They were dressed as sailors. While the girls were in the middle of a dance routine, Short's skirt came undone. Short had to finish the routine by subtly adjusting the skirt whenever she had a chance. By the end, her skirt had almost fallen off of her behind. A few more jumps would have pulled it down completely.

Short was offered a job as Wally Dunn's, a famous comedian, sidekick. He wanted her to sing and dance at Sunday concerts with him at the London Palladium, which is a theater only the biggest stars get to perform at. Short planned on accepting the job and starting right after the revue was over at Clacton-on-Sea.

"I had always had a flare for comedy. It was what I really wanted to do," said Short, recalling that when she was young, all she ever did was go to comedy shows at the local theater in Manchester.

When Short was 18 years-old, she and a fellow chorus-line girl were riding in the car with the conductor of the revue, Paul Jones. They did not know it at the time, but Jones was drunk. He lost control of the car and ran into a light post. An empty bottle of

vodka was found under the driver's seat after the accident. Short's friend, who was riding in the passenger's seat, suffered from a major concussion. She had severe headaches for the rest of her life. Short, who was riding in the back, suffered from a broken ankle. The flesh on her lower legs was torn off to the bone. The wreck was on the front page of every newspaper with headlines reading, "Two Show Girls in Car Crash."

Short had to have plastic surgery, in which skin was taken from the top of her legs to cover where the flesh had been torn on her lower legs. To this day, she has indents across her shins, which she keeps covered. Short had to stay in the women's ward in the hospital from the end of September to the end of December. The doctors told her it was doubtful she would ever dance again, but Short brushed their comments off.

When Short got out of the hospital, she contacted Sparky right away. Instead of doing physical therapy at the hospital, Short chose to do tap dancing.

"I did the physical therapy once at the hospital. It was exactly the same as beginner tap dance lessons. I didn't want to waste my time in that hospital anymore," said Short.

Short was able to learn to dance again. The only problem she had was with pointing her toes. Sparky backed her 100%. She helped her learn all of the dance routines over again. She told Short she would figure out a way to get her back on stage.

"She [Sparky] treated me like her daughter. Being back on stage was all that mattered, and she knew that. She really helped me to get back to dancing after the car wreck," said Short.

The first performance she did was at a floor-show cabaret, in which she performed the can-can with seven other girls as she did before the accident. Before the shows, Short filled in her scars with makeup and wore tights.

In between shows, Short stayed with her friend Sylvia. During one of Short's stays, Sylvia set her up on a blind date with the "man of [her] dreams," Glen Short, who was, at the time, in the US Air Force. Glen eventually made Short choose the theater or him, for he did not want her touring around the United Kingdom without him.

So, in 1955, when Gladys was 19-years-old, she chose to quit the theater and settle down.

"I will never forget the time I spent performing. The theater and performing will always be in my blood. There are no regrets," said Short.

Short and her husband had three daughters, Anita, Darlene, and Debbie. She and her family lived in England for a few years, but moved to the US when her husband was called back by the Air Force.

As a wife and a mother, Short continued to be very passionate. She brought the theater into the family. There was always some sort of drama in the house. Her first daughter, Anita, described her mother as "very over the top and exaggerated".

When Short was only 32 years old, her husband died. This did not kill Short's theatrical spirit, however.

"When my mom was in theater, she always worked hard and was very competitive. She made do with what she had and did everything she could to get ahead. She took that attitude and applied it to raising her kids after my dad died," said Anita.

Gladys Short is still as theatrical as she was 55 years ago. She can still remember the songs she sang, the dances she danced. Just bring up the topic of her being in the theater and she will put on a show for you. Though she has been out of the industry for more than five decades, she will always be a show girl at heart.