The Battle of Britain

My engagement in April 1940 to play Lily Brayton's part* in a revival of *Chu Chin Chow* (directed by Robert Atkins) coincided with Hitler's plan to march across Europe.

During WWI, this musical, based on *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves,* had broken all records, and hopes were high that we might do the same. Prior to London, we had a twelve-week tour in the provinces and triumphed everywhere. But while we were taking city after city, Hitler was taking country after country, and we were both getting nearer to London.

In the end, his victories exceeded ours and he started taking some of our audiences. So Joe Fenton and his backers decided to close the show before doing our last two weeks at Streatham and Golders Green. They had cold feet and weak hearts. But not so the actors. Lyn Harding, Jerry Verno, Dennis Noble, some of the principals and I agreed to take over the show for the last two weeks. The backers paid for the rent of the scenery and costumes, while we paid the full salaries of the dancers, the chorus and small-part actors out of the theatre takings, keeping three pounds each for ourselves.

While we were delighting audiences in Golders Green Hippodrome, Colonel Bundy, the director of the Palace Theatre, came to see us and liked the show so much that he took us over. The backers came back and we moved into the Palace Theatre. Our opening was a great success, the critics praised us, the audience loved us, and we played to full houses. We were lucky people, we actors: for three hours we were in the sun-drenched streets of Baghdad and could forget the war.

We were told that in the original production they had had three camels, two donkeys and three goats. We could only support one small donkey, a quiet, meek-footed creature who had a passion for peppermints and was stabled backstage because of the threat of air raids.

Our scenery was not very distinguished, or realistic. Our slave market in Baghdad was a very clean place compared with the real one that I saw in 1958 when I was acting my solo the-

atre of short stories on a Middle East tour for the British Council. After one of my performances in Baghdad, a very rich sheik gave a party for me in his Spring Palace. I had heard of winter and summer palaces, but a spring one seemed to me the height of extravagance. After a delicious oriental supper, we went out into his tropical garden and while the guests were walking about I sat with my host drinking sour milk. His long white robe and burnous made a secret of his dark-bearded face; it glowed faintly in the moonlight reflected from his robe. He asked me if I had ever been in Baghdad before. I replied that once, in a play, I had been sold as a slave in the market at Baghdad. He was amused, saying that he would have paid any price.

The slave-girl revolts: RF in *Chu Chin Chow,* 1940

Chu Chin Chow opened with a scene in Kasim Baba's palace where a feast was being prepared by the servants, and my first line on entering was, 'How now, Abdullah, what guest art thou preparing for tonight?' We and the audience knew very well what guest *we* were preparing for in England: he wore high boots, had a tiny moustache and was a hysterical and dangerous dictator. So this opening line always caused great laughter.

In August, the Battle of Britain began, and bombs were dropped on London. Every night at 9.30 the air raid siren would wail in counterpoint to the Cobbler's song and the bombing never stopped until the next morning. The usual announcement went up on the screen, advising the audience not to leave the theatre during the raid; the show would go on. After the final curtain, we changed into our ordinary clothes, the stage hands cleared away the props, and then we and the audience prepared to spend the night together.

Jerry Verno told stories and made jokes. Dennis Noble sang popular songs and we all joined in the choruses. We acted charades with the audience on the stage, and one night a girl went into the orchestra pit and played some Chopin nocturnes beautifully on the piano. But it was all like masturbating a tired body. As the night wore on, many people lay on the floor of the bar and boxes and tried to sleep.

In the morning, after the All Clear at about 7.30, everyone went to their homes or work. On leaving the theatre, I got quite used to looking around to see what was still standing. Now the people of the earth took over from the people of the sky. Typists, complete with powder, lipstick and handbag, walked carefully among the broken glass on the roads and pavements. Everybody was friendly, happy to be still alive. One lived in a sort of chamber of horrors, keeping one's eyes closed, refusing to see them, living in a small circle of light, afraid to look beyond. Thinking only of what was to be done, thinking there is nothing but this moment and living it to the full.

What strange things happened on those nights during the London run of *Chu Chin Chow*! Sometimes, after the show, Peter Bennett, who played Kasim Baba, and I would take a chance and scramble back to his home in South Kensington. Though I had taken the make-up off my face, I still had the

brown legs, arms and body of Zarat the desert slave-girl, and the comforting smell of the theatre hung about me.

Peter's mother was one of those cool-headed, brave English county-women who never seem upset by disaster. Every night, she would go upstairs to her bed, refusing to take any notice of the sirens' warning, and sleep undisturbed. But Peter and I ate our supper under the grand piano, or sat curled up in a cupboard under the stairs, talking quietly and listening to the soft thuds of falling bombs. They didn't sound hazardous; they were more like a caress, a bruise among the brittle noises of anti-aircraft guns.

Once, Bruguière came up for the weekend and I booked us into the Ritz Hotel, feeling that the rich might have a better chance of survival. No sooner had we lain down in our luxurious beds, with pillows like clouds, than the sirens wailed and anxious official voices told us to take our quilts and pillows and go to an especially safe corridor. There we found lots of guests lying in bundles on the floor, looking like an old print of Florence Nightingale's hospital ward in the Crimea.

I remember one very old lady who always sat bolt upright in a chair, wearing her mink coat over her nightclothes, a hat on top of her nightcap. She would never use the word 'bomb'; I think to her it had a vulgar sound like 'shit'. She would say, 'I hear they dropped something on St Paul's Cathedral last night ... I do wish they'd leave our churches alone.' Once there was a constant sound of running water and a maid dashed by, saying, 'It's one of the lavatories. The raids have upset it and it can't stop flushing.' It sounded almost human, expressing itself in this way, more human than the brave, tight-lipped people lying on the floor.

Sometimes, after the show, I'd slip out of the stage door with a friend and, beneath the search-lighted sky and noise of the guns, we would run to a little underground club nearby, where many actors gathered after their performance. Here we drank, and entertained each other. Once Peter Ustinov gave a wonderful imitation of a radio making odd and rude noises during a pompous political speech, and here for the first time I heard 'A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square', played and sung by the composer, I believe.