SPREADING WISDOM
British post-war light entertainment, the BBC and the emergence of television

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The monopoly enjoyed by the BBC Television Service in the UK prior to the introduction of ITV in 1955 led to accusations that the BBC was unprepared for competition and was reluctant to provide popular programming of the kind transmitted by its commercial rival. Using an archival case study of one popular entertainer, the comedian Norman Wisdom, this paper argues that sections of the BBC Television Service, notably Variety and Light Entertainment, worked hard from 1947 onwards to provide programming that relied on notions of 'celebrity' and 'stardom' in ways which anticipated the later success of ITV. Though hampered by financial constraints, entrenched institutional values and technical limitations, as well as competition from live variety, the film industry and radio, key personnel within the BBC Television Service did much to establish television as a popular medium even before the introduction of commercial broadcasting in 1955.

KEYWORDS BBC; competition; Wisdom; early television; variety; celebrity; ITV

Prior to the introduction of the commercial television service that began in Britain in 1955, there was criticism of the BBC's conservatism and complacency and, in the years immediately before and just after the introduction of commercial television, accusations that it was unprepared for competition. Using the case study of one highly successful British entertainer, this paper challenges the view that the early BBC Television Service ignored and was isolated from these competitive pressures. As this evidence suggests, between 1947 and 1955 forces within the BBC were working hard to establish television as a medium that was both distinctive from sound broadcasting and, despite financial, institutional and technological constraints, one that would have wide popular appeal by employing the talents of 'star' performers. As the case study suggests, even before the introduction of ITV, the BBC was negotiating a relationship with the commercial, with 'stardom' and 'celebrity', in ways that had far-reaching implications for television as a popular medium. Far from being unprepared for the challenge from the popular programming that characterized ITV, between 1947 and 1955 the BBC played a crucial role in the construction of popular television that placed it at the centre of national life and cultural identity for much of the second half of the twentieth century.

The view that the BBC was ill-prepared for competition is understandable. It was not until April 1953 that the BBC Board of Management decided formally that it was time to 'give thought to the problems which were likely to arise with the introduction to sponsored television' (Briggs *The History* 940). Just eight months before the commercial companies began broadcasting, the Director of Television George Barnes told BBC staff in January 1955 that the competition from ITV would 'be deathly' (Briggs *The History* 937). In a six-month period following the introduction of commercial television in September 1955, nearly 500 staff left the BBC to go and work for the new commercial television companies. By 1957, BBC Television's share of the viewing audience had declined to 28% and

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appeared to confirm the view held by some that the Corporation had simply been unprepared for the competition posed by ITV (Briggs *BBC* 300) Even the pioneering and influential BBC television producer Grace Wyndham Goldie later considered that:

> The truth is that few of us really believed that a commercial television service would be started or that, if it were, it could be successful. (Goldie 110)

However, this evidence deflects attention from the extent to which BBC Television, particularly in light entertainment programming, had established itself in the face of significant competition, both within the BBC and from established interests in the British entertainment industry.

Although the epistemological and methodological issues raised in studying British television histories have begun to be addressed by a growing body of work, much of this relates to the period following the establishment of ITV. British television *prior* to 1955 remains largely unexplored.[1] Yet, it was in this period that the relative importance of television over radio was established, significant technical advances and appropriate production techniques began to be deployed, important debates over financial structures were rehearsed, and the tensions between 'official' and 'popular' discourses became increasingly visible in programming policy. Arguing that the Reithian version of a concept of the 'public realm' was under challenge in the cultural climate of post-war Britain, a culture increasingly characterized in the 1950s by a decline in social deference, John Corner notes that both indigenous and imported American programming shown on ITV

> had the effect of shifting the nation's nightly viewing further away from paternalistic framings, towards the enticement and satisfaction of viewer pleasure which were, for the new network, *institutionally* necessary for survival. (Corner 12)

As the word *further* indicates, and as this paper intends to show, this process was evident within the BBC Television Service *before* competition from ITV in 1955, as a number of voices within the institution, notably those involved with Variety and Light Entertainment, argued that popular programming material was just as important for the BBC as it would become for ITV.

Any attempt to understand early television history involves what Janet Thumin refers to as 'the imaginative recall of a lost object' (Thumin 1). Lacking the programmes themselves, this paper offers a case study of the British entertainer Norman Wisdom, based largely on material held in the BBC Written Archives Centre.[2] Following Roger Silverstone's insistence that it is through the 'dynamics of the particular' that we are most likely to comprehend 'the forces of structure' that condition culture (Silverstone 164), this case study makes it clear that the BBC's emergent Television Service worked hard between 1947 and 1955 to develop strategies that would enable it to compete with a range of established and new entertainment media in the effort to build an audience. The material also reveals the conflicting attitudes, values and competition that existed within the BBC, not only at managerial level, but also between the established and well-funded radio service and the fledgling television service and, at times, between different departments within the television service itself. By examining what might be regarded as the rather mundane processes involved in negotiating and fulfilling contracts with a performer who was increasingly seen to have 'star' quality, the case study also throws light on the deeper institutional and ideological debates within the BBC centred around reconstructed notions

of the 'popular', since the commercial connotations of 'stardom' exposed what were perceived by some as key distinctions between the BBC and ITV. Finally, although it reveals uncertainties about how best to use the talent it engaged, the material appears to confirm a view that what the BBC lacked was not strategies to deal with competition, but the finances and institutional synergies to implement them.

The re-emergence of television in Britain on 7 June 1946 following the shut-down in transmission during the war years took place within the context of a popular entertainment industry which was still dominated by radio, live variety theatre and the cinema. The BBC's sound broadcasting service had responded to challenges from Radio Luxembourg and other commercial competitors; radio programmes such as *Band Waggon* attracted huge audiences before and during the Second World War. Established variety artists such as Bud Flanagan and the Crazy Gang, as well as new talent emerging after the Second World War, were playing to live audiences in theatres across the country, including prestigious venues such as The Palladium and the Victoria Palace in London.[3] In 1946, Britain's 4,700 picture houses experienced a record level of 1,635,000 cinema admissions, a level more or less maintained into the mid-1950s. All this posed particular problems for BBC Television light entertainment programming in the late 1940s, which found itself competing for artists whose sought-after talents were already heavily committed to existing engagements elsewhere, especially in live variety theatre. Attempts to negotiate appearances on television, still a novel and unproved medium, involved the artists themselves and, more importantly, powerful agents who represented those artists, who knew the financial attractions of live variety bookings and were intimately connected with other strands of popular show business.

This was a situation already familiar to colleagues working in BBC Radio. For example, in making the arrangements for the radio programme *Children's Variety Hour* broadcast on the North of England Home Service live from the Jubilee Theatre Blackpool at 5.00 p.m. on 30 August 1949, an internal BBC memorandum from the Programme Executive North region to the Variety Booking Manager in London lists the artists who have agreed to appear on the broadcast, including Charlie Chester, Arthur Haynes, Frankie Howerd, Norman Wisdom and Julie Andrews. Significantly, the contact addresses for all 12 artists are 'care of' the live venues at which they are appearing, including The New Opera House, The Hippodrome and The Central Pier. Programme transmission time was designed not to interfere with the times of live performances on stage.[4]

Norman Wisdom

The extent to which, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, light entertainment on BBC Television, organized initially through the Music and Variety section, needed to work closely with, and often around, the demands made elsewhere on the artists can be seen clearly in the BBC's relationship with Norman Wisdom and those charged with looking after his business interests. Though Wisdom enjoyed spectacular success live on stage throughout the 1950s and beyond, he is perhaps best known to British audiences through a number of films he starred in during the 1950s and 1960s. The majority of these films, from *Trouble In Store* (1953) to *Press For Time* (1966), were produced for Rank, mostly shot at Pinewood Studios, and are still being regularly recycled on broadcast television and

DVD. Yet, this privileging of the films as the significant moments of Wisdom's entertainment career disguises other important elements in the success of the man who was known for some time as Britain's most popular comedian and who enjoyed cult recognition in countries as disparate as Argentina and Albania. In particular, cinema success has erased the importance of radio and especially television in helping promote Wisdom's popularity, something which he appeared to acknowledge in a *Daily Herald* interview in 1953 concerning a new series being planned by the BBC:

> TV started me off to stardom four years ago. I'm paying off a debt . . . TV is the greatest star-maker in the business.[5]

If television was good for Norman Wisdom, he was also good for television. The critical attention given to his films disguises the important role Wisdom and other variety artists and comedians had in establishing BBC Television light entertainment programming in the 1950s, as it worked to establish itself as part of the entertainment landscape alongside live variety theatre, radio, records and cinema. Though some new television 'personalities' emerged, such as chef Philip Harben, horticulturalist Fred Streeter, comedian Richard Hearne and panellist Gilbert Harding,[6] BBC Television realized the importance of attracting artists who were, or were becoming, known through other entertainment media.[7] For Wisdom, that importance might have been even greater had the BBC been able to use him as much as they would have liked to. Though a reader's poll conducted by the *Sunday Graphic & Sunday News* in November 1951 rated Wisdom a close second behind Arthur Askey in television's popularity stakes, the BBC was frequently thwarted in capitalizing on his growing popularity to boost viewing figures.[8]

Wisdom's difficult and impoverished childhood, his indebtedness to the British army where he served as a bandsman in the late 1930s and his desire to become a professional entertainer is well documented, both in his autobiography and in the various interviews he has given through the years.[9] As he recounted to Jean Metcalf on the BBC Radio's *Woman's Hour* broadcast on 1 February 1956, his army experience fuelled his determination to appear on the professional variety stage, still the primary performance site for aspiring comedians and singers in 1945:

> I got into a concert party in the Army and I met some professional people who suggested I ought to try it professionally, so I went to Collins Music Hall, Islington, and I just thought it was easy. I went to the Manager and said 'I'd like to go on the stage. May I?' And he said: 'Well, the profession is really overcrowded now. I don't think you stand much of a chance.'[10]

Wisdom's perseverance led to his first professional engagement at Collins Music Hall in December 1945, where he was billed as 'The Successful Failure'. Further bookings came along for appearances at provincial variety theatres in Basingstoke, Portsmouth, Hastings and a pantomime spot in Brighton. Spotted by impresario Bertram Montague, Wisdom was signed for a 15-week tour in a variety revue, *Let's Make Hey!*, devised and directed by Montague. This 'Superb and Colourful Revue', at Shepherd's Bush Empire featured Wisdom in three ensemble scenes, as well as a solo spot where he was billed as 'Abnormally Foolish'.[11]

Wisdom's career in live variety, revue and pantomime was boosted by his new agent Billy Marsh, who worked for Bernard Delfont, and the competing attention from Delfont

and Val Parnell, the two most important impresarios in British show business, resulted in an appearance at the London Casino in April 1948, billed as 'Britain's Newest Comedian'. Much of Wisdom's success lay in his stubborn refusal to observe the limitations which Delfont attempted to place upon his 14-minute act combining comedy and music. Told that he only had six minutes on stage, Wisdom performed his act in its 14-minute entirety, to what he claims was 'rapturous applause' (Wisdom 134). Together with his earlier appearance at the Victoria Palace, with Laurel and Hardy topping the bill, Wisdom's appearance at the London Casino marked the beginnings of a relatively lucrative live stage career which continued beyond the 1960s. In addition to myriad television appearances as a comic performer, Wisdom was later to reveal his abilities as a straight actor in the 1982 BBC television play *Going Gently*, directed by Stephen Frears. His television appearances continued into the present century with cameo roles in, amongst others, *Last of the Summer Wine* and *Coronation Street*.

The Early BBC Television Service in Context

Although the number of people employed in the Television Service increased from 456 in June 1946 to 677 in June 1948, lack of investment in the new medium remained significant. Having to cope with the inevitable restriction on resources resulting from the austere economic landscape of post-war Britain, most of the BBC's limited budget was spent on the established radio service. Briggs records that:

> Only £14,487 was invested in television equipment in the financial year ending 1946 as against £214,587 in sound, and television operational costs were fixed in 1946/7 at £249,140 – below the 1939 estimates, when prices had been far lower. In 1947/8 . . . the BBC was spending £716,666 on television and £6,556,293 on sound broadcasting. (Briggs *BBC* 241–42)

Though Maurice Gorham, the newly appointed Director of Television, announced that 'television is coming back' in the 1946 BBC Yearbook, he was not present at the BBC Governors' meetings except by occasional special invitation. Moreover, only about one in every 12 items on the Governors' agenda dealt with television (Briggs *The History* 208). The relative lack of credibility enjoyed by the Television Service within the BBC in the late 1940s is evident in the BBC's Yearbooks of the period: in 1947, only four pages out of 152 are devoted to the 'Television Service'; three pages plus a four-page article on 'A Night At Alexandra Palace' by Ernest Thompson in the 1948 edition; and still only three pages augmented by an article by Grace Wyndham Goldie on 'How Television Talks Are Produced' in the 1950 Yearbook.

The development of television was undoubtedly hindered by management structures and attitudes within the BBC. That same year, 1950, one commentator was of the opinion that:

> Without some revolutionary change in the management of British broadcasting, the development of television as a national service, . . . will drag on interminably. What is also in jeopardy, at the present slow rate of expansion, is the development of television as an art, or at least as an artistic technique in its own right. (Baily 104)

These financial and managerial constraints inevitably had an effect on programming. At a time when live outside broadcasts (OBs) represented a significant element in BBC Television's output, some proposed OBs were cancelled because of a lack of suitable equipment. A television version of *How To Furnish Your Flat* was cancelled in late 1947 owing to the unavailability of the furniture (Briggs *The History* 211). These deficiencies were noted by contemporary commentators. In 1948 John Newnham was clearly excited by events surrounding television production, but wrote that in the studios at Alexandra Palace there 'is scarcely room to move . . . [A]lmost every available inch is occupied' (Newnham 22). Things appear not to have improved two years later:

> Television, for all its wonder and possible glamour, has been produced on one cramped corner of an old fashioned building, the rest of which sprawls around in crumbling disrepair . . . Even now, with new studios promised – no dates given – it will continue for some time to make-do without adequate space, equipment, staff . . . (Baily 100)

The financial constraints often made it difficult both to attract popular talent and to present it in the best light, so that, in addition to problems about gaining credibility within the BBC, the Television Service often aggravated relationships with the talent and the agents they hoped to attract. These were not helped by the often raw standards of television production which characterized some early television output.

In March 1952, the comedian Frankie Howerd was reported in the *Daily Express* to be refusing to take part in any more of a series called *The Howerd Crowd* produced by Bill Lyon-Shaw. Though not wanting a live audience for the show, Howerd found himself doing the show before an audience of about 500 in the Bedford Theatre, Camden Town, which had seating for 2,500. With poor lighting and the audience placed at least 50 yards from the stage where he was performing, Howerd resorted to a 'theatrical' type performance, even though the TV cameras were shooting close-ups. As his agent Stanley Dale complained:

> Camera work is very important to Frankie. Viewers who get a bad impression from TV pictures are hardly likely to pay to see him at a theatre the week after.[12]

Noting that his TV appearances cost Howerd some £2,000 gross takings which he would have earned appearing in live halls, Dale went on to comment that 'the BBC fee doesn't meet that by quite a long way'. Of course, this may have been a negotiating ploy by Dale on behalf of his client and certainly reflects the problem that BBC Television was facing in trying to recruit talent that was able to earn much more elsewhere. Whatever other internal resource problems BBC Television faced in these early years, it is clear that the budgets available to pay for the artists it wanted to build the profile and reputation of light entertainment were limited. This may explain some of the problems it had in recruiting increasingly successful and popular artists such as Howerd and Norman Wisdom for its programmes. Even though the three *The Howerd Crowd* shows were critically well received and Cecil McGivern, BBC Television's Controller of Programmes considered Howerd a 'television natural', Howerd was unsettled by the experience and decided to concentrate on his radio career, though he did return begrudgingly to television at the end of 1952 (McCann 118).

If television in the 1950s was, as John Corner has argued, 'in the process of becoming the principal instrument both of public information and of national cultural

identity' (Corner 4), the seed-bed of that process can be detected in the internal debates about programming policy, about the 'correct' balance between the 'responsible' and the 'popular', that took place within the BBC Television Service in the late 1940s and very early 1950s. The intensity of these debates resulted in the resignation in October 1950 of Norman Collins as Controller of Television, and his replacement by George Barnes. Collins felt strongly that the 'vested interests' in sound broadcasting were inhibiting the development of television; the BBC Governors felt that Collins wanted to make television 'too popular' and that Barnes would keep 'within the system' (Briggs *BBC* 274). Although these differences would later centre on whether the BBC could justify its licence fee if it failed to attract the large audiences that ITV commanded, the debate in the late 1940s was framed, as Grace Wyndham Goldie put it, around the question of

> [h]ow to ensure the observance by television of BBC standards without destroying the vitality of a new and rapidly expanding service. (Goldie 52)

BBC staff, including television producers anxious to prove the distinctiveness of the new medium, were told by the retiring Director-General Sir William Haley in October 1952 to

> Fight against lowering of standards . . . Television must not become a film industry. Television must remain civilized and adult. (Briggs *BBC* 274)

Haley's successor, Sir Ian Jacobs, was far more willing to spend money on television and realized the need to be more competitive in outlook. By July 1953, the BBC Board of Management were evidently aware of impending competition and discussed, amongst other things, staff salaries and the importance of attracting new and existing talent. Although there was continuing talk of 'the value of non-commercial broadcasting' and the importance of 'standards', by 1953 BBC management showed itself increasingly aware of some of the implications of competition (Briggs *The History* 940–42).

It was the case that, even after 1955, many within the BBC remained critical of what they regarded as ITA's obsession with 'wiggle dances, give-aways, panels and light entertainment' and there remained a reluctance to reduce 'the proportion of intelligent programmes in main viewing hours', a strategy described in 1956 by Gerald Beadle, then BBC Director of Television, as the 'hydrogen bomb of television competition' (Briggs *BBC* 301–302). However others, including Ronald Waldman who was put in charge of Television Light Entertainment in January 1950, were much more enthusiastic about programming that would prove attractive to what was rapidly becoming a national audience.[13] Despite deep-seated institutional fears, Waldman and others within some departments of BBC Television were committed to securing and, wherever possible, retaining the talents of performers from the commercial world of live variety, cabaret and the cinema. Even before Frankie Howerd, Jimmy Edwards and Tommy Cooper, Norman Wisdom was a rising talent that the BBC Television Service was keen to engage.

Wisdom and BBC Television

It was in this context of ideological and political antagonism towards the 'popular' and the 'commercial', of institutional scepticism about the fledgling television service, of management deficiencies and bureaucratic obstructionism, and of severely constrained budgets that Wisdom began his television career, a career that (along with a number of

other celebrity performers) was deeply implicated in defining the distinctiveness of television as a medium and of shaping attitudes towards television and its audience in the 1950s and beyond. Prior to the arrival of ITV, BBC Television worked hard to secure his services against competition from more lucrative live variety and film contracts. After 1955, the BBC found it harder to retain his services in part because of the competition from a rival broadcasting system that was more overtly 'commercial', had bigger budgets, and enjoyed close structural and institutional links with the world of live variety entertainment.

Even before his success at the London Casino and his first radio broadcast in 1949, Wisdom had made an appearance on BBC Television in a programme broadcast live from Alexandra Palace at 3.00 p.m. on 22 November 1947. *Variety*, produced by Eric Fawcett, was just that, with Wisdom appearing in a six-minute spot along with singer Gwen Catley, conjuror Dennis Forbes, comedian Frank Raymond and the Southern Singers. His contract with the BBC paid 15 guineas (£15.75). Though it is not possible to evaluate the response from the tiny London-based audience who would have seen the show, it is clear that following his success at the London Casino, Wisdom was asked to make another appearance for BBC television's *Variety* slot, produced by Richard Afton, who would go on to work extensively with Wisdom for the BBC. This time he was given headline billing and the 45-minute programme went out live as *Wit and Wisdom* at 3.00 p.m. on 18 October 1948 and again at 8.30 p.m. two days later. Perhaps recognizing his rising popularity, the contract stipulated that Wisdom should be paid 45 guineas for the two appearances. However, in the process of changing managers, the contract appears to have gone astray, forcing Wisdom to complain to the BBC in a letter addressed from the Alexandra Theatre in Birmingham and dated 31 January 1949:

> No doubt it is because of this misunderstanding [about changing managers] that I have not yet received my cheque for the Television appearance that I made last October.[14]

Although there is evidence that BBC Television contracts appear to have gone missing on a number of occasions, the absence of a signed and returned contract appears not to have prevented programmes from being broadcast. Whether these contracts were delayed or went missing because, in his case, Wisdom was extremely busy juggling a career that involved radio, live stage appearances, television and, from 1948, film, or whether they were a result of what remained an under-resourced part of the BBC in a period in which radio was still regarded as the flagship enterprise, is difficult to say.[15]

Missing contracts and delayed payments were not the only source of conflict and dispute between Wisdom, his agent and the BBC. Wisdom appeared on *Rooftop Rendezvous*, produced by Richard Afton from Alexandra Palace Studio 'A', on 9 April 1949. An internal BBC memo from Holland Bennett, the BBC Television Booking Manager, to Richard Afton details Billy Marsh's concerns about the lack of publicity given to Wisdom's appearance:

> I believe you already know that Billy Marsh of Bernard Delfonts was very much upset about the lack of publicity given to Norman Wisdom's appearance in *Rooftop Rendezvous*. It seems he was given a tremendous build-up after his last television appearance in October last year and Mr. Marsh was anxious that the build-up should be at least as big next time.[16]

An atmosphere of hostile, mutual dependence existed between the BBC and other elements of the entertainment industry, particularly live variety, during this period. Complaints about lack of what was perceived as proper acknowledgement were not confined to television, but were also made to the BBC concerning some of Wisdom's appearances on radio. Following the broadcast of *Sunny Side Up* on the Light Programme in September 1951, impresario Claude Langdon wrote complaining about the lack of proper acknowledgement of Wisdom's appearance in Langdon's ice-show *London Melody* at the Empress Hall in London. An internal memo from Patrick Newman, Variety Booking Manager for radio, accepted that the BBC had 'slipped up' in omitting mention of *London Melody* in the *Radio Times* and stressing the importance of a proper microphone acknowledgement.[17] Newman later wrote to Langdon on 1 October 1951 apologizing for the errors made, though rather shifting blame on to Billy Marsh:

> I know you will appreciate that it is not always possible for us – coping with the innumerable artists we do – to remember where each and every person is appearing, and this point can only be safe-guarded if, at the time of booking, the agent or artist puts in his request for a credit. Unfortunately no one in my Department had this request from Billy Marsh of Delfonts.[18]

Interestingly, Newman makes reference to another aspect of Langdon's complaint, but replies:

> I am afraid that I have no jurisdiction over Television which is a separate entity and perhaps you would be good enough to take this up direct with Television Booking Manager.[19]

The separation between BBC Radio and BBC Television was visible in other ways. Though BBC radio producers showed some interest in Wisdom's talents as a vocalist, BBC Television was really only interested in Wisdom as comedian, despite some efforts by Billy Marsh to promote his abilities both as a singer and as an actor. In a letter to the BBC as early as October 1949, Billy Marsh wrote:

> As you know this artist is particularly versatile, and he is quite prepared to devote his time in rehearsals, whether it be for comedy, straight vocals and even, for that matter straight plays, rather on the lines of the 'Guinea Pig'.[20]

At a time when his reputation was still emerging, BBC Television seemed reluctant to use Wisdom for anything other than comedic or variety spots. Patrick Hilliard replied to Marsh on behalf of BBC Television:

> I am afraid it will not be possible to consider using him in a series. We will, however, keep him in mind for any 'Music Halls' or Floor Shows we have scheduled between now and the end of the year and I will circulate his name amongst our Light Entertainment Producers.[21]

Wisdom did make a number of successful appearances on radio in 1949 and 1950, and worked with producer Richard Afton on two television shows, *Cuckoo College* in May 1949 and *Music Hall* in July 1950. Enthusiastic responses from, amongst others, *ITMA* (*It's That Man Again*) scriptwriter Ted Kavanagh and support from established show business personalities such as Henry Hall and Gracie Fields, together with his growing success as a live comedian and in variety shows including pantomime and ice-shows, lead to Wisdom being contracted to 'supply three sketches' for *Wit and Wisdom* which was broadcast from

Alexandra Palace on 30 August 1950 from 8.45 to 9.30 p.m. The critical reception to his performance verged on the ecstatic; Richard Dacre cites the *Sunday Observer* as remarking that 'Television has discovered . . . a clown so prodigally endowed with talent that he might become another Grock if someone will take him in hand' (Dacre 19).

In December 1950, on *Critic's Choice*, Wisdom performed the 'short act required' in his contract and was the focus of discussion from some admiring TV critics. He was then contracted to appear alongside Arthur Askey in a programme which was broadcast as *All The Fun Of The Fair* on 26 March 1951. As late as 12 March, only a fortnight before transmission, producer Graeme Muir was writing to Wisdom asking him to think about what he would do on the programme:

> I am setting all the acts in tents as if they were part of the side-shows at the fair. I would like you, if you will, to do six or seven minutes. Will you think about this and drop me a line letting me know approximately what you are going to do and also what props etc. you would like laid on.[22]

From a contemporary perspective on television production, this seems a remarkably casual approach towards a television programme that was going out live, though may well indicate something of the risky, experimental and casual culture of early BBC Television, a medium at this period that was, in John Caughie's phrase, 'living on the edge' when live transmission was too often plagued by 'broken cameras, trembling sets, tangled cables, even actors dropping dead on the set while the show went on' (Caughie 41).

The comments from one early and sustained critical examination of television make it easier to understand why BBC Television light entertainment was so keen to offer Wisdom further contracts. Noting that television variety had discovered nothing 'videogenic' in the way that *ITMA* and *Much Binding In The Marsh* had been 'radiogenic', Kenneth Baily was of the opinion that 'some televised variety is best left unseen'. The search for talent through 'talent discovery programmes' had been largely disappointing, offering only 'pathetic pictures to watch'. Recognizing that television was still exploring appropriate production techniques, Baily remarked:

> There is one comedian who seems to have everything that television can take, and in the taking makes it one hundred per cent effective entertainment. This is Norman Wisdom. He has the clownlike antic, the polished movement, the accurate timing, the subtlety of facial expression, and a sound range of fun and pathos . . . (Baily 56)

Baily considered that talk of Wisdom as 'the television comedian' was understandable and probably justified.

Wisdom and Celebrity

Suddenly, under the guiding hand of agent Billy Marsh, Wisdom was in growing demand. Convinced of his worth as a television performer who attracted audiences, BBC Television was determined to use him as much as possible, though this did not always prove easy, not least because of an element of bureaucratic inflexibility about programming schedules. Graeme Muir, who had produced *All The Fun Of The Fair* earlier in March, wrote to Wisdom in June 1951 regretting that he had been unable to confirm his availability for a television broadcast based on the Earl's Court Radio Show and that the

programme would go ahead without him. Wisdom's primary commitment was to the seven-month run of *London Melody* at the Empress Hall, though Billy Marsh did write to enquire whether there was any chance of Wisdom appearing in his own television show on Sunday evenings when he was not working at the Empress Hall. His letter drew a response from Holland Bennett, BBC Television Booking Manager, noting that 'we practically always do a play on Sunday evenings which means there is no opportunity of using a comedian'.[23] However, the BBC did manage to engage Wisdom for a number of programmes in late 1951 and into 1952, including televized extracts from the ice-show *London Melody*, the first of three annual appearances on *Christmas Party*, an appearance as a celebrity guest on *What's My Line*, as well as *The Norman Wisdom Show* broadcast on 27 February 1952. Wisdom's appeal to audiences was reflected by an increase in the fees paid by the BBC and by open acknowledgement of his success on television, as when Holland Bennett wrote to the Head of Children's Programmes suggesting that Wisdom is interested in doing one or more programmes for children and noting that 'He has a big television public and might I think be useful to you.'[24]

By 1952, the BBC's desire to use Wisdom was made even more difficult as his growing success across the entertainment business attracted increased attention in the popular newspapers. In early January 1952, the *Daily Herald* predicted real success for Wisdom:

> He will be one of the biggest stars before this New Year is out. On television and the stage. And in a few years time he will be one of the greatest international comedians since Charlie Chaplin. Hard-headed business says so. Gracie Fields says so. Charlie Chaplin says so.[25]

His appearance on the 1951 televised *Christmas Party* was apparently seen by Earl St John, Senior Executive Producer at the Rank Organisation, who signed Wisdom to a seven-year film contract. In April 1952, Wisdom started what was to prove a 16.5-month run in the variety revue *Paris To Piccadilly* at the Prince of Wales theatre in London. In November 1952, he made a real impact at the Royal Variety Performance at the London Palladium where, in addition to his physical clowning, he sang his self-penned number 'Don't Laugh At Me'. A five-year contract with Columbia Records followed.

The BBC's desire to make use of Wisdom and his popularity with the British public lead to a rash of appearances which revealed some internal communication problems between the different BBC Television departments and, ironically, to some concern that he might be over-exposed to the viewing public. In January 1953, following Wisdom's appearance on the 1952 *Christmas Party*, Billy Marsh wrote to Ronnie Waldman, Head of Light Entertainment Television, that Wisdom would be unable to undertake further commitments for a number of professional and personal reasons. Waldman replied that the BBC was

> . . . bitterly disappointed. I am sure that you know how much we would like to have another programme from Norman as soon as possible.[26]

With three exceptions (*Coronation Music Hall* in May 1953, *For Your Pleasure* in October and an earlier brief interview on *The Radio Show* in September) Wisdom's attention was elsewhere: regular twice-nightly appearances in *Paris To Piccadilly* and day-time filming for Rank. Although his appearance as 'television's favourite comedian' was edited out of the

1953 film *Meet Mr. Lucifer* (shot at Ealing), *Trouble In Store* was filmed at Pinewood, and when released in November 1953 confirmed Wisdom as an important film comedian and box-office attraction.[27]

In spite of this busy working schedule, which also included another ice-show, *Sinbad The Sailor* at the Empress Hall, Wisdom had signed a BBC contract in October to appear in the third *Christmas Party* to be directed by Bill Lyon-Shaw and shown on Christmas Day 1953. However, he was also scheduled to appear on two other programmes around that time: a children's Christmas party show from Paddington Hospital on 18 December and *Joan Gilbert's Christmas Party* the following day 19 December. There were also some rumours circulating within the BBC that Wisdom had been contracted to appear in a 'straight' play at around the same time. Faced with all this, Wisdom appears to have tried to pull out of *Christmas Party* due to be broadcast on Christmas Day. Appalled by the possibility of losing Wisdom and by the apparent lack of coordination within BBC Television, Ronnie Waldman wrote to Cecil Madden, then Head of BBC Light Entertainment:

> Surely there is something badly wrong here? Wisdom is one of the very few really good Light Entertainment artists in the country. Our major programmes are badly in need of the handful of good comedians in existence. Why were we not kept in touch with all these offers and plans?[28]

Madden's reply is interesting in that it revealed the extent to which BBC Television light entertainment was already implicated in the wider entertainment business, though it seems to suggest that the BBC was still sometimes defensive in responding to proposals on behalf of artists such as Wisdom:

> This artist gets heavily pushed by Delfonts, the Rank people, and Al Hunt of Empress Hall.[29]

However, Madden's awareness of the influence of theatrical and other entertainment interests on the BBC presaged a change of attitude within the BBC that was coming from the top and was beginning to permeate the institution. Though as late as 1955, George Barnes, the Director of Television Broadcasting, expressed a view that 'to seek success in popularity alone is a trivial use of a great invention', there was growing awareness that the BBC, faced with the increasing likelihood of opposition from the commercial sector, needed to be both more appealing and competitive in its programming (Briggs *BBC* 300).

By 1953, the BBC Board of Management recognized the seeming inevitability of commercial opposition and the structural, financial and institutional advantages such competitors were likely to enjoy. At its meeting in July that year, in addition to discussing staff salary levels and additional television equipment, considerable attention was given to the drain on performing and writing talent that might result from the introduction of a rival service, since it might be provided by companies with existing interests in the entertainment and media industry. As it turned out, these fears proved to be well founded. Associated Television (ATV) relied on the financial support from the Incorporated Television Company (ITC), a powerful consortium of leading interests in entertainment including Moss Empires, Howard and Wyndham and the Grade Organisation. Under the leadership of Prince Littler and Lew Grade, ITC represented

> the largest theatrical agency in Europe covering every aspect of the entertainment industry, as well as being producers and presenters of plays, musicals, revues and pantomimes.[30]

In a climate in which the BBC was increasingly aware of the need to retain successful talent, Madden was able to confirm the rumours that Wisdom was being considered for at least one appearance in a play, something that both Wisdom and his agent Billy Marsh had been persistently pushing for:

> It is true that H.D.Tel [Head of Drama, Television] asked Delderfield to write a play for him and Wisdom has a play draft too but none that would be ready for Christmas Day.[31]

In the end, Wisdom did go ahead with his contractual obligation to appear on *Christmas Party*, but not before the whole episode revealed some friction within the different departments of the television service in what was referred to as the 'spread of Wisdom'. The Head of Children's Programming, Miss Freda Lingstrom, clearly resented Waldman's implication that 'major' programming meant Light Entertainment and wrote to Waldman

> I quite agree that an artist may be seen too often, but I have been trying for two years to get Wisdom for children. (emphasis in original)[32]

There clearly was substance to the rumours that Wisdom was being considered by BBC Television for appearances in dramatic plays. Michael Barry, Head of Drama, Television, noted Wisdom's express desire to be involved in 'straight' or 'legitimate' acting and informed Ronnie Waldman that two scripts had been commissioned with Wisdom in mind. Though nothing appears to have come of this, Barry wrote a letter in February 1954 to Wisdom congratulating him on the 'magnificent show we all watched on Sunday night', presumably the television broadcast of extracts from *Sinbad The Sailor On Ice* at the Empress Hall on 7 February 1954 and continuing:

> I do hope however, that you will be able to fit in 'Chick' . . . The script seemed to me to offer what we were all hoping for – and to be different from 'Trouble In Store', so that you would have the chance of creating a character just that much different from your own self.[33]

Wisdom seemed as keen to do something different from his earlier variety-type performances on BBC Television, assuring Barry that 'I can assure you that I wish to do a comedy play on television very much.'[34]

The box-office success of *Trouble In Store* (1953) and *One Good Turn* (1954), together with the runaway success of his stage-show *Paris To Piccadilly* and the ice spectacular *Sinbad The Sailor* propelled Wisdom to celebrity status and inevitably changed his working relationship with BBC Television Light Entertainment. To an extent, this had already been evident in his appearance on BBC Radio's *Desert Island Discs* broadcast on 17 April 1953, where host Roy Plomley greeted the 'star comedian' by noting that 'few young artists have reached the top as quickly as our castaway this evening'.[35] Increasingly, rather than relying on his comic talents to feature in programmes, BBC Television was forced to acknowledge Wisdom's star status and respond to the promotional pressures which accompanied this. For example, in the December 1953 *Joan Gilbert's Christmas Party*, Wisdom was interviewed about the success of *Trouble In Store*, an interview described as 'very good stuff'.[36] In August 1955, arrangements were made with Val Parnell at Moss Empires for BBC cameras to go behind the scenes at the London Palladium during the show *Painting The*

Town so that Wisdom could, as the contract states, 'be interviewed and sing number from his latest film [*sic*]'.[37] Similar promotional spots occurred throughout 1956 and into 1957, in shows such as *In Town Tonight* (May 1956), *Show Talk* (August 1956), *Television Motor Show* (October 1956), *Picture Parade* (November 1956) and *Kelly's Eye* (June 1957). Ultimate recognition of Wisdom's multi-faceted career came with his appearance on *This Is Your Life* broadcast from the Playhouse Theatre in Manchester on 2 December 1957.

Wisdom, the BBC and ITV

Following the Television Act of 1954 and the establishment of the Independent Television Authority (ITA) as overall regulator, the first regionally-based ITV companies had begun broadcasting in September 1955. Though the original intent of structuring internal competition between the commercial companies had been lost, 'independent' television clearly represented a challenge to some of the institutional values still held within the BBC:

> From the very beginning the new channel gave notice that it was going to develop its own characters and also that its approach to the viewing public was to be different from the BBC. (Sendall 319)

In fact, a significant proportion of ITV's popular programming involved talent already well known to BBC Television viewers.[38] The synergies that existed between some of the new commercial companies and the wider world of entertainment, ITV's more generous budgets, and a determination to schedule popular programming untrammelled by the institutional baggage that existed within the BBC, made working for ITV very attractive for artists such as Wisdom.

Though an interest in popular programming was evident in all the new companies, ATV with its connections with Val Parnell and Lew Grade was particularly successful in positioning itself as a major provider of television light entertainment, not least through its flagship programme *Sunday Night At The London Palladium*, first broadcast in September 1955, the 'ultimate expression of the ''showbiz'' element in ITV' (Sendall 322). Already having to work around demands of live variety and cinema, BBC Television light entertainment programming was thrust into a highly competitive situation in attracting variety performers and establishing formats which were popular with the burgeoning television audience. This is very evident in the BBC's dealing with Wisdom and his business representatives, all of whom were eager to utilize whatever opportunities the new ITV companies might offer.

In October 1955, Wisdom made his first appearance for ATV on the third transmission of *Sunday Night At The London Palladium*. Perhaps spurred by this, Ronnie Waldman as Head of Light Entertainment Television had written to Bernard Delfont 10 days later about the possibility of a 'series of not less than six 30 minute or 45 minute ''live'' Norman Wisdom shows to be presented fortnightly'.[39] This was followed by a letter on 27 October from Holland Bennett, BBC Television Booking Manager, to Lew Grade, confirming that discussions had taken place and noting that Bernard Delfont's agency would make 'arrangements', presumably through Wisdom's agent Billy Marsh who worked for Delfont. Grade's response to Holland Bennett was equivocal, noting that as Bernard Delfont was 'away', nothing could be progressed. A letter from Ronnie Waldman direct to Delfont on 16 November clearly indicated that alarm bells were ringing at the BBC. Though

willing for negotiations to go through Delfont, Waldman raised concerns about recent rumours in the press:

> Several publications have issued statements that the Norman Wisdom series would be produced in about February 1956 for the I.T.A. channel. This statement apparently originated at roughly the same time as the date of our lunch. If the statement is true, our negotiations would obviously be a waste of time; if it is false are you considering some form of denial?[40]

The extent to which the BBC were keen to produce the series can be gauged from the fact that Waldman appears to have had personal discussions with Wisdom whilst he was shooting his film *Man Of The Moment* at Pinewood. However, towards the end of the year, Waldman wrote directly to Wisdom informing him that, despite all the courteous and productive talks which had occurred, 'the series cannot be arranged'. Waldman assured Wisdom that the breakdown in discussions was nothing to do with any 'financial considerations because we never reached this point in the talks'. His hopes that this would prove a temporary postponement in plans must have been encouraged by a reply from Wisdom early in the new year in which he stated that:

> I am still interested in appearances on BBC and hope that some time in the not too far distant future, it will happen.[41]

For whatever reason, so things turned out and the first of three hour-long *The Norman Wisdom Show* was broadcast under the *Comedy Hour* slot on 6 October 1956.[42] The BBC's patience and perseverance must have seemed more than worthwhile when the figures for audience size (11.25 million) and appreciation (AI: 76) became available. Waldman noted that the figures were

> Amongst the highest ever achieved by any Television entertainment programme. Both in terms of audience size and audience 'appreciation' the show was a really tremendous success and I don't need to tell you how delighted we are with the result.[43]

The delight experienced by the BBC was not matched by their ability to retain a monopoly over Wisdom's services, despite the evidence that the BBC was capable of matching ITV in television ratings. Though Billy Marsh agreed that he would not do any other shows 'for other Television services' before 1 December 1956 (the transmission date of the third BBC *Norman Wisdom Show*), there were some disagreements about interview appearances for ITV companies before that date, finally leading to a letter from Billy Marsh objecting to the BBC's attempts to tie Wisdom exclusively to them:

> You have a most co-operative star who should be given the right to take part in any other interview programme for any other channel should he so desire.[44]

Having stated this theoretical position, Marsh then added that Wisdom had in fact undertaken a 30-second commercial television advertisement for a magazine promoting his life and career and that the advert would be broadcast 'within the next two to three weeks'.

In fact, that first appearance on *Sunday Night At The London Palladium* in October 1955 proved the first of many programmes that Wisdom went on to make for ITV companies, mostly, though not exclusively, ATV. Although Wisdom also made numerous appearances for BBC Television, including the expensively budgeted Christmas Day 1964 broadcast of the pantomime *Robinson Crusoe*, both the nature of variety-based light

entertainment television and the monopolistic position of the BBC were a matter of history. In fact, by 1964, broadcasts such as *Robinson Crusoe*, despite attracting an audience of 18.5 million, were themselves increasingly anachronistic, as television replaced live stage entertainment as the primary entertainment medium in the UK.

Conclusion

Though the introduction of ITV broke the BBC Television Service monopoly, it is clear that, in the area of light entertainment at least, the BBC had anticipated the demand for the kind of popular programming promised by ITV and had been relatively successful in securing talent that would have popular appeal. As Briggs argues:

> What is particularly interesting during this first period of competition is that the BBC did not lose out, as had been feared, in all branches of entertainment . . . (Briggs *BBC* 305)

The dogged perseverance of television personnel such as Ronnie Waldman had proved that the elements within the BBC were aware of the commercial appeal of 'stars' such as Norman Wisdom and their value in enabling the BBC to compete with ITV in popular programming. If BBC Television lost out in the ratings war with ITV during the latter half of the 1950s, it was not because it was unprepared for competition, but because it lacked the financial resources and overall institutional commitment to 'entertainment' that characterized the new commercial providers. As Briggs argues:

> The main source of irritation inside the BBC – and it grew – was the fact that by the late 1950s the [ITV] companies . . . soon had far more money at their disposal than the Corporation. (Briggs *BBC* 301)

The BBC's early Television Service had to battle against entrenched institutional values that were deeply suspicious of the 'commercial' and the 'popular', was 'vulnerable to traditions of machine-like administration' (Baily 105), suffered serious deficiencies in technical equipment, staffing and budgets, experienced experimental uncertainties about production techniques, and competed for talent against competition from established entertainment interests. Against this background, the determination of BBC Light Entertainment to employ popular artists such as comedian Norman Wisdom marked a serious and important challenge to paternalistic and elitist assumptions about broadcasting and its relationship with the post-war British audience, and served to announce the importance of the television 'celebrity' as a fundamental element in television's appeal and popularity.

Notes

1. With the exception of Jacobs (2000) and Caughie (2000), both of which examine early developments in television drama, most critical attention has been given to television post-1955. For example, the majority of essays in the collected edition edited by Corner (1991), are concerned with events after the introduction of ITV. The collection of essays edited by Thumin (2002) explore British and American television, with some attention to the years before 1955. However, there is evidence of research interest in British television before this date, as in Holmes 53–74.

2. In an interview with the author, Wisdom struggled to remember his early television work, though his recall of his films, all of them preserved on video and DVD, was total.
3. See, for example, Flanagan (1961) or the more recent Sykes (2005).
4. BBC Written Archives Centre (WAC), Wisdom Television File 1 (NWTF) Internal memo n.d., Programme Manager North Region to Variety Booking Manager London. All the artists agreed to broadcast without taking a fee, but were each offered three guineas (£3.15) expenses. The 18 musicians in Geraldo's orchestra were paid agreed Musician's Union fees. Wisdom received 10 guineas (£10.50) when the show was re-broadcast on the Light Programme on 11 Sept. 1949.
5. Pearce 1952.
6. On Gilbert Harding, see Medhurst 60–74. For contemporary comment on Richard Hearne, BBC Television's 'Mr Pastry', see Newnham 1948.
7. Baily 53 considered the results of some early BBC Television talent discovery programmes 'pathetic pictures to watch'.
8. Paul 1951.
9. Wisdom with William Hall 1992.
10. Transcript, 'Guest of the Week', *Woman's Hour*, BBC Light Programme, 1 Feb. 1956, BBC WAC microfilm.
11. Programme Bill for Apr. 1947, BBC WAC, Personal Artists File, Television File 1, 1947–60.
12. Anon., *Daily Express*, 1952.
13. Stimulated by the forthcoming Coronation of Elizabeth II, for the first time in 1953 more television sets were manufactured than radio sets. The Coronation attracted an audience of between 19 and 20 million viewers. The American networks' treatment of the event, described as a 'commercial carnival', confirmed some in the view that the BBC monopoly was worth retaining.
14. BBC WAC NWTF. Letter from Norman Wisdom to BBC, 31 Jan. 1949.
15. For example, a letter from D.E. Knight in the BBC Television Booking Section to Wisdom dated 1 June 1949 reminded him that the BBC had not yet received signed contracts for either *Rooftop Rendezvous* and what is referred to as *School For Scamps* (referred to elsewhere as *Crazy College* and *Cuckoo College*). Another letter from Knight to Marsh dated 11 July, noting that the contracts were still unsigned and that the BBC were keen to issue cheques they were holding, drew a response from Marsh requesting duplicate contracts as the originals 'apparently have been mislaid'. Letter from Billy Marsh to Knight, WAC, NWTF.
16. BBC WAC NWTF internal memo.
17. BBC WAC T12/547/1 internal memo.
18. BBC WAC T12/571/1. Letter from Patrick Newman to Claude Langdon, 1 Oct. 1951.
19. Ibid.
20. BBC WAC NWTF. Letter from Billy Marsh to Patrick Hilliard, BBC Alexandra Palace, 28 Oct. 1949.
21. BBC WAC NWTF. Letter from Patrick Hilliard to Billy Marsh, 1 Nov. 1949.
22. BBC WAC NWTF. Letter from Graeme Muir to Norman Wisdom, 12 Mar. 1951.
23. BBC WAC NWTF. Letter from Holland Bennett to Billy Marsh, 20 June 1951.
24. BBC WAC NWTF. Memo from Holland Bennett to Head C.P. Television, 27 Dec. 1951.

25. Pearce *Daily Herald* 1952.
26. BBC WAC NWTF. Letter from Ronnie Waldman to Billy Marsh, 27 Jan. 1953.
27. The *Daily Telegraph* of 15 Dec. 1953 wrote that 'British films have desperately needed a new comedian. Now they have him.' The newspaper went on to predict that Wisdom would become one of the British film industry's biggest stars.
28. BBC WAC NWTF. Internal memo from Ronnie Waldman to Cecil Madden, 11 Dec. 1953.
29. BBC WAC NWTF. Internal memo from Madden to Waldman, 14 Dec. 1953.
30. Sendall 118. For more on the role of Lew Grade in the development of ITV, see Bignell 57–72.
31. BBC WAC NWTF. Internal memo, 14 Dec. 1953.
32. BBC WAC NWTF. Internal memo, 16 Dec. 1953.
33. BBC WAC NWTF. Letter, 10 Feb. 1954.
34. BBC WAC NWTF. Letter from Norman Wisdom to Barry, 17 Feb. 1954.
35. BBC WAC T12/547/1. Script for *Desert Island Discs*, tx BBC Home Service, 17 Apr. 1953.
36. BBC WAC NWTF. Internal memo from Cecil Madden to director Alan Sleath, 28 Dec. 1953.
37. BBC WAC NWTF. BBC contract dated 31 Aug. 1955.
38. For example, Michael Miles who hosted ITV's successful *Take Your Pick* had previously presented *Michael Miles House Party* on BBC Television from 1951. For the development of quiz shows on early BBC Television, see Holmes 53–74.
39. BBC WAC NWTF. Letter, 19 Oct. 1955.
40. BBC WAC NWTF. Letter, 16 Nov. 1955. Richard Dacre cites the *TV Times* of 4 Nov. 1955 as one source of these statements and rumours (Dacre 66).
41. BBC WAC NWTF. Letter from Wisdom to Waldman, 7 Jan. 1956.
42. The two subsequent broadcasts were on 3 Nov. and 1 Dec. 1956.
43. BBC WAC NWTF. Letter from Waldman to Billy Marsh, 18 Oct. 1956.
44. BBC WAC NWTF. Letter from Marsh to Bush Bailey (assistant to Holland Bennett), 29 Oct. 1956.

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