



Ralph Reader, C.B.E., M.B.E. 1903 - 1982

The History of the Gang Show

An edited extract from "The Scout's Pathfinder Annual" originally published in 1969 by the Scout Association. Somewhere in the world a Scout "Gang Show" is being produced every day of the year. Since the first "Gang" took a bow in 1932, this unique entertainment has throughout the world raised more than five million pounds for the Movement. The creator, writer and producer of the "Gang Show" is Ralph Reader, C.B.E., who was born in Crewkerne, Somerset, England, and who for many years was a leading actor and theatrical producer in New York and London. He sacrificed a brilliant career in the theatre for an ideal and is known throughout the world as a champion of youth. Through Gale Pedrick he tells you here the story of the "Gang Show", how it began, how it grew, and how it spread all over the world.

Let me start with a story about the Red Scarf, the scarlet neckerchief with gold lettering on the back, which reads, simply, "G.S." It may be worn only by those who have taken part in a "Gang Show".

One night in West Africa about twenty-five years ago, when I was in the Royal Air Force, I was sitting in my tent. A burly young pilot walked in. He stood there, in his light-blue R.A.F. uniform, grinning from ear to ear. Around his neck was his Red Scarf. All he said was, "What time does rehearsal start, Skip?"

In Alexandria I was attached to the Royal Navy when they brought in the Italian Fleet. While I was standing on deck one evening a young sailor walked over to me and handed me his "Gang Show" scarf.

"Sign this for me, Ralph; it's my mascot," he said.

I signed it. He still has it today when the show is on; but the signature has been washed out by seawater. He was twice torpedoed. The signature didn't remain, but the colour did. It's nice to know these "symbols" mean so much - perhaps because they stand for so much.

So, you see, even in those days the Scout "Gang Show" was spreading its wings. It wasn't any longer a London experiment, which was "taking on" in other cities in Britain. It was building up the worldwide status I'm proud to think it now has.

Never a day goes by without someone somewhere saying to me, "How did the 'Gang Show' start? What's the secret? How did it all begin?" Well, there was a beginning. There is a secret; and these two things together make up the story of the "Gang Show".

My tale really begins on the day I met the Holborn Rovers, and -almost before I knew it- became one of them. It was for these boys that I wrote all the sketches and songs for a single concert. It was the first time I'd ever attempted such a thing. Not that I was ever very happy about that word "concert". You see, my life had been spent in the professional theatre, first as an actor and producer on New York's famous Broadway, and then in London. Indeed, when the plans for the first "Gang Show" were being laid, I was rehearsing a new show at the Palace Theatre. No, I was determined, once we were committed, that any entertainment we would put on with the Holborn Rovers and their friends would be a real production: no trek-cart displays or drilling or any of the routine items which seemed always to be included in my Scout "concert".

Well, after that show, Admiral Philpotts, who was then the County Commissioner for London, stopped me outside the lift at Scout Headquarters and told me how much he'd enjoyed the Holborn Rovers show. Then he said, "Reader, we've a wonderful camp-site at Downe, and we're very anxious to build a swimming-pool there. Can you help us raise the money?"

I'd missed that lift two or three times, and as I badly wanted my lunch in the restaurant four floors up I said, "Yes, sir, sure I'll do it." I made a dive for the lift, but before I got out of it again I wondered what I'd let myself in for.

I lunched with Fred Hurl and another pal "Tinny" Fellowes, and before that meal was over we'd planned the programme for a big-scale revue, and, what's more, had decided that the best place to put it on was the Scala Theatre, which lies between Oxford Street and Tottenham Court Road, London. I knew that I wanted a hundred-and-fifty boys and men in the company and that, to satisfy my pride in the Movement -and my own self-respect- it would have to be well up to West End standards!

Our first rehearsal was held on May 25th, 1932, my birthday. And I may say that one of the happiest thoughts I still have about this period of my life is that a number of my friends of those days - the true pioneers- are still actively concerned with the show, among them Fred Hurl, now Chief Executive Commissioner of the Scout Association, Jimmy Cregeen, who, with his two sons, Ken and David, is still a tower of strength, and Jack Beet, whose middle name is "Rover" and whose life has been spent in the 4th Harrow.

One night during rehearsals word was brought to me that the title of the show had to be decided that evening so that posters could be got ready for the initial announcements to the public. We had just broken for coffee. Then I told one of the boys to call the cast back to continue rehearsals. As they all crowded back into the room I said to the youngster, "Are they all back?" He looked at me and in a Cockney voice said, "Aye, aye, Skip; the gang's all here."

I stood rooted to the spot. "The gang's all here!" "THE GANG'S ALL HERE!" That's it! That was the title we had been looking for. We were a Gang and the Gang was all here. Yes sir, I thought, that's IT.

Well, after all kinds of alarms and emergencies. the show went on. At the first night we took curtain-call after curtain-call. Within a fortnight we knew that we'd raised enough money to buy that swimming-pool.

"Can you write another show for next year?" I was asked. "Yes," I said, "and let's get cracking right away."

Within the next month I started on the next production. Each year the "house full" boards have gone up, and sometimes the demand for seats has been SO terrific that as much as a hundred thousand pounds has had to be returned.

The rest is history, so far as the "Gang" is concerned. Since those early days I've written countless songs and , sketches. The torch was taken up enthusiastically in cities and towns throughout our own country. Then the word spread overseas, and those songs (notably our signature- tune, "Riding Along on the Crest of a Wave") and the sketches and production numbers were being seen and heard in a dozen different countries.

The "Gang Show" became a truly Commonwealth possession -more than that, even, for we have our American friends, and I've been proud that the great city of Chicago- once the home, indeed, of a very different gang'- regularly gives its own productions of our British shows. There are "Gang Show" enthusiasts the other side of the world, and not so long ago I "opened" the first-night of a production in New Zealand by telephone from my home in Hendon.

The continuity of the "Gang" has been one of the most remarkable experiences of my life. Our youngsters have grown up, have married, and then brought their own boys into the show. Each year sees a new intake, but as I look round at rehearsals it seems to me that I'm surrounded by the same eager faces which smiled back at me in the first pioneering days and nights. I have to admit it, I am a sentimentalist. When, for some reason or other, I have to take a boy out of a number and replace him by one of his pals, I have to screw up my courage before I can get the words out. There have been one or two instances when I refused point-blank to withdraw a boy from a number because I thought it would hurt him too much. With the older members of the cast this situation doesn't exist. Phil Davis, one of our original members, was once taken out of one of the chief sketches because I believed another man would give a better performance. Not only did Phil come straight up to me and tell me I was right, but Don Werts, who went into his part, immediately went up to Phil to apologise. Phil broke into a roar of laughter and said to Don, "Don't worry about that, Don. The 'old man' feels worse than either of us." He did, too!

This is why I am so proud of the Gang; this is why I can take the worry and accept the problems; because of this spirit I can somehow keep awake at night and still find time during the day to turn out the material for the next programme. There is no finer example in the world of Scouting than the example of the boys and the spirit that flows through every member of our red-scarf Gang. That is why I can sing so happily, "I wouldn't change for a man with a million, for I've got a million blessings more." And every blessing stands for a boy who is in or has been in the "Gang Show".

Friends still ask me to tell them how it came about that "Riding Along on the Crest of a Wave" became the "Gang Show" anthem. About the third or fourth rehearsal of the 1936 show we arrived at the First Act Finale. The boys were seated round the piano, and I told them we would be doing another Sea Scout number to bring the curtain down. "Is it going to be as good as 'Steer for the Open Sea?' Dinky Rew asked. "I don't know, son," I replied. "Learn it first and then tell me what you think."

The lads soon picked up the song, but without any special enthusiasm. They sang it again and again, and although I waited patiently for someone to express an opinion none was forthcoming. So we turned to the other songs and soon were busy on the floor with the production. Then Dinky Rew came over to me. "Skip, I like that song best of the lot," he said. "Do you, Dink?" I answered. "I don't know what the others thought of it, but we'll try it again later on before we go."

Towards the end of the rehearsal I got them round the piano and we went over the song again. This time there seemed to be quite a changed atmosphere among the boys. They sang it with all the gusto they were capable of and at the end of the second refrain they actually applauded themselves. Then a voice boomed out from the rear of the Drill Hall. "Let's have it again, Ralph, and we'll all sing it."

A group of young Territorials was standing at the back. They had been listening and watching the rehearsal. So again we let it rip, with the Terriers joining in. They were the first "outsiders" who ever sang "We're Riding Along on the Crest of a Wave."

That song more than any other sealed the success of the Gang Shows, and later I used it as my own personal signature tune. It has been sung in every country of the world where Scouting exists and was the theme song in one of the prisoner-of-war camps during the 1939 war. It was sung at the beginning and end of every R.A.F. Gang Show on every battle front through the war days. It was used as the finale of one of the major episodes of the Aldershot Tattoo, and played by the massed bands of the Brigade of Guards.

I was present at one of these performances with four of my young Scouts, and when the strains of it came over the night air one of my boys turned to me and said, 'Lumme, Skip, they got a nerve pinching our song.'

Yes, I'm a lucky man, for I've got the biggest family in the world, even though all my "sons" have different fathers.