

Pierrots Perfected: Louis Rihll and Artistic Developments in Concert Party Entertainment on the London and Provincial Stage, 1900-1930¹

In the Foreword to the late Clarkson Rose's informative book *Beside the Seaside*, the theatre historian W. Macqueen-Pope described the concert party genre as the "Cinderella of the Theatrical Art" and "sadly neglected", but asserted that "in no branch is more expert knowledge and wider talent required" (9). This book, published in 1960, followed the earlier well-known works of Ernest Short, and in particular of Christopher Pulling, that touch briefly on aspects of concert party history within the wider context of 'popular' entertainment (Short and Compton-Rickett 242-49; Short 147-56; Pulling 143-65). The subject of concert party immediately evokes the spectacle of the Pierrot troupe entertaining young and old from a seaside 'pitch', or of the 'costume concert party' performing at a Spa or Pier Pavilion, powerful images integral to the social and cultural history of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The latter period experienced the rapid growth of an 'industry' whose importance to the local economy was recognised as early as 1910 (Robins 26-28). This dynamic was encouraged in part by the Urban District Councils whose system of competitive tendering for a 'Pierrot pitch' or 'beach space' generated valuable seasonal revenue (see for example *Stage*, 2 Nov. 1911: 33). Concert and alfresco entertainments were also of social importance as an outlet for all classes as leisure time increased, and the transport network expanded to support coastal enterprises (Walton 27, 94; Nield 96-104). The music publishing industry also benefited since the songs composed by artists were lucrative not only for themselves but also for their publishers (Pulling 236-42). No comprehensive history of the genre has been written however, and although several valuable publications for the general reader have been

published in recent years,² academic interest is only now emerging as exemplified by David Calvert's work on the British Pierrot tradition.

Among the estimated thousand or more concert parties that have existed in the British Isles since the 1890s,³ some achieving fame in a local or regional context (those of Edwin Adeler, Will Catlin and Andie Caine being of particular note), the two considered *par excellence* (by past authors at least) were Pélissier's *Follies* and the *Co-Optimists*. It was through the improvisational and engaging genius of Harry Gabriel Pélissier (1874-1913) that the Pierrot entertainment form first became established in London and the West End in the early 1900s, thus laying the foundation of English so-called 'intimate' revue (Pulling 217-18, 220; Mander and Mitchenson *Revue*, 22; Moore iii, 18-20, 44-46). The *Co-Optimists* continued this vogue with spectacular success from 1921 for nearly a decade. The many accolades showered on the *Follies* and the *Co-Optimists* have however obscured the work of other artists who also contributed significantly to the changing entertainment landscape of this period. This essay gives due critical attention to these neglected aspects for the first time with particular reference to the concert party proprietor and actor-comedian Louis Rihll (1879-1931).⁴ This choice is justified on a number of grounds. First, Rihll's *Tatlers*, formed in 1902, were not only one of the earliest concert parties of the twentieth century (*Stage*, 3 Jul. 1919: 20), but were also one of the first to appear in the West End. Second, although Rihll's name is hardly remembered today, referenced only fleetingly in earlier accounts, in his time he was recognised as one of the first pioneers of concert party, and of the more sophisticated form of the genre (*Stage*, 15 May 1924: 20). He also served for many years on the Council of the Concert Party Proprietors' Association, formed in November 1913 (*Stage Year Book*, 1914: 140-41), alongside other leading lights such as Philip Braham (1882-1934) and Douglas Furber

(1885-1961). Central to this study is the theme of collaborative endeavour. Rihll had a business as well as an artistic persona. He was thus not only a proprietor, theatrical manager and agent, but also a gifted comic actor and entertainer. His story, of one who lived through the heyday of the concert party, therefore affords a useful model for understanding both the nature of the business and artistic partnerships forged during this period, and of their impact on the development of this form of entertainment. Chief among Rihll's associates in these respects were three key individuals: Wolseley Charles (1889-1962), Charles Heslop (1883-1966), and Leslie Henson (1891-1957). Wolseley Charles was a brilliant pianist and composer who, after a spell with Rihll's *Tatlers*, formed the *Scamps* and *Zeniths* with former *Tatlers* comedian Herbert 'Gus' Burney. Charles followed H. B. Hedley to become second pianist to Melville Gideon in the *Co-Optimists* (Sterne and de Bear 79-81), but his career stretched well into the 1950s.⁵ Charles Heslop, together with Ernest Crampton (1864-1941), proprietor also of the *Cigarettes* and *Curios*, formed the *Brownies* concert party in 1908 (Rose 116-20; Pulling 153-54), and enjoyed a long and distinguished career as an actor in light comedy roles.⁶ Leslie Henson, with his facial contortions and goggle-eyed appearance, was considered one of the most outstanding comedians of his generation (Shorter 616-18; *Times*, 3 Dec. 1957: 13). His early career progress, like that of so many others, may be directly attributed to Louis Rihll's help, a fact fully acknowledged by Henson in his two autobiographies.

Louis Rihll's early acting experiences, before his entertainment career began in earnest, were typically varied, and offer an entry-point in exploring his later business and artistic endeavours. His earliest role came in August 1904 in Paul Rubens' musical play *Three Little Maids* at Ryde during a three-month tour with Charles Macdona's company. According to the *Stage* (4 Aug. 1904: 5) "Mr Louis

Rihll as Lord Cheyne was largely responsible by his quaint humour for the success of the play”. In the Autumn of 1905 Rihll joined Clifford Essex’s *Royal Pierrots* concert party as comedian during a two-week tour of the Channel Isles between 31 August and 14 September (*Star*, 2 Sep. 1905: 2; *Guernsey Evening Press*, 1 Sep. 1905: 2; *Stage*, 7 Sep. 1905: 7; 21 Sep. 1905: 7). Essex, a singer-banjoist, is famous in concert party history for having been the progenitor of the modern troupe, first performing with his *Pierrot Banjo Team* at Henley in 1891 (*Times*, 4 Feb. 1946: 6). Rihll has also been associated with Pélissier’s *Follies* by an individual claiming to have been the oldest surviving person to have seen them live on the London stage (*Stage*, 12 Jan. 1978: 12). He recalled Rihll as a pianist but perhaps confused his name with the similar-sounding Louis Laval who joined the *Follies* in 1905 for a number of years as their musical director and pianist (*Stage*, 20 Jul. 1905: 5).⁷ In December 1907 Rihll took the role of D’Artagnan in a musical adaptation of *The King’s Musketeers* at the Town Hall, Leamington (*Leamington Spa Courier*, 29 Nov. 1907: 1 & 13 Dec. 1907: 4). Wolseley Charles was on the piano, this being the earliest of their many collaborative ventures. Rihll’s “very effective” comedic debut in London occurred on 30 March 1908 at the Paragon Theatre as Colonel Theobald Buster in Frank Stanmore’s ‘tabloid musical comedy’ *The New Boarder*. The songs and chorus pieces were written by Frank Alford Armstrong, Rihll’s future brother-in-law (*Stage*, 26 Mar. 1908: 13 & 2 Apr. 1908: 12). At the Cripplegate Institute (London) in December 1908 and January 1909, Rihll played the role of Caleb Plummer in the amateur production, *Dot*, an adaptation of William T. Shore from Charles Dickens’ *Cricket on the Hearth* (Fitz-Gerald 207).⁸

Rihll’s early forays on the legitimate stage (while managing his early *Tatlers* troupe) coincided with a period of unprecedented proliferation of concert parties

across the country. His so-called ‘costume comedy company’ of “two ladies and three gentlemen” (*Stage*, 1 Sep. 1910: 6 & 29 Sep. 1910: 9) was just one among an increasing number of touring and resident troupes jostling for work at seaside resorts, and occasionally inland. Leslie Henson joined the *Tatlers* in early 1910 at Penarth (South Wales) as a rank amateur, and first stepped on the stage with them as a professional performer (as a replacement for Rihll when he was absent) at Bath in May 1910 (Henson *My Laugh Story*, 89-98, 106-9; Henson *Yours Faithfully*, 21-30; *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 15 Jun. 1940: 5). At this time the *Tatlers* included Christine Roy (vocalist), Dora Dolaro (soubrette), Wolseley Charles (piano), Herbert Burney (light comedian who specialised in child imitations), and Louis Rihll (low comedian). Henson remained steadfastly proud of his concert party roots asserting that it is “one of the best training grounds for the actor’s job” (*Era*, 10 Jun. 1931: 7), and describes at length his dealings with Louis Rihll in his two autobiographies. Henson left the *Tatlers* in the Summer of 1911 (Henson *My Laugh Story*, 99), and although subsequently joining the *Scamps* and *Zeniths* concert parties of Charles and Burney (Henson *My Laugh Story*, 127, 142), he and Rihll were to enjoy a close working and family friendship [Figure 1].



Figure 1. A photo of the Henson family (ca. 1948-50) showing Leslie Henson, his third wife Harriet (known as Billie), and Henson's two sons Joseph (second from left) and Nicholas (seated far right). The Rihll and Henson families maintained a close friendship, even after Louis Rihll's death, as reflected in the caption to the photo which reads "To the Rihlls. Our love from the Hensons". Picture courtesy of Paula Gear née Rihll.⁹

It was the appearance of the *Tatlers* on the London stage in November 1911 that was to place Rihll and Wolseley Charles' association on a firm footing. Although their professional relationship was intermittent (like Rihll's with Henson), they nevertheless enjoyed a long-standing friendship. This was also a key phase in the history of Pierrot entertainment in the West End. Pélissier's *Follies* appeared there first at the Royalty in 1907, and at the Apollo between 1908 and 1911 (*Stage*, 2 Oct. 1913: 28; Short 1946: 149-53). They in turn were closely followed by the *Grotesques* concert party (originally under Vere Smith, and later the pianist-composer Philip Braham of *March Hares* concert party fame) at the Queen's Hall (Langham Place), London (*Daily Express*, 22 Jun. 1909: 5), and at the Savoy in 1910 (*Stage*, 27 Jan. 1910: 13). The *Follies* proved a hard act to follow, and for the *Grotesques*, their initiation turned out to be a baptism of fire. "Poor singing of trivial songs, and on the Savoy stage of all stages" commented the *Stage* (15 Sep. 1910: 18) with some foreboding. In the same article were important points of a more general nature which were no doubt heeded by Louis Rihll, whose time was soon to come. The *Stage* continued:

"Are not the ambitions of Pierrot troupes a little far-reaching when they affect the West-End theatres? . . . sufficient for the day are The Follies thereof. Pierrot entertainments, if they are to last . . . must freshen their bills, employing composers and librettists worth listening to, and also vocalists . . . who have good voices and have been trained to use them . . . these Pierrots and Pierrettes in green and black by no means live up in their general entertainment".

Despite their uncertain start, the *Grotesques* registered fifty performances at the Savoy before moving to the suburbs (*Stage*, 27 Oct. 1910: 16). More importantly, they demonstrated the feasibility of Pierrot entertainments in the metropolis, even in the

wake of the inimitable *Follies*. The *Tatlers* first appeared in London at the Globe Theatre as the curtain-raiser to *The Glad Eye*, José G. Levy's farcical comedy in three acts (adapted from Paul Armont and Nicolas Nancey's *Le Zèbre*) under the direction of the theatre lessee and manager Louis Meyer (1871-1915). *The Glad Eye* was first produced at the West Pier, Brighton, on 4 September 1911 (*Stage*, 24 Aug. 1911: 15), before being transferred to the Globe (and later the Apollo and Strand) on 4 November, playing for a total of 494 performances (*Stage*, 9 Nov. 1911: 19; Wearing 1982, 1: 182-83).¹⁰ Fortunately for Rihll and his *Tatlers*, the play was a huge success (*Daily Express*, 24 Feb. 1912: 10), affording him not only priceless publicity, but also the perfect platform for his future endeavours in London [Figure 2].

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THE GLAD EYE
A Farcical Comedy in Three Acts.
Adapted by JOSÉ G. LEVY
From the French "Le Zèbre" by MM. ARMONT & NANCEY.

Gaston Bocard	.. .. .	LAWRENCE GROSSMITH
Maurice Polignac	.. .. .	H. MARSH ALLEN
Galipaux	.. .. .	E. DAGNALL
Chausette	.. .. .	ARTHUR HATHERTON
Ferdinand Floquet	.. .. .	GEORGE BEALBY
Tracassin	.. .. .	PHILIP KAY
Comte de la Beuve	.. .. .	J. PARISH ROBERTSON
François	.. .. .	STEPHEN WENTWORTH
Police Sergeant	.. .. .	EDWARD IRWIN
Lucienne Bocard	.. .. .	AURIOL LEE
Suzanne Polignac	.. .. .	DAISY MARKHAM
Kiki	.. .. .	ETHEL DANE
Juliette	.. .. .	ENID SASS

ACT I. .. Morning Room at the Chateau de Vercottes, M. Galipaux' House in the Country, near Paris (*Schmitz*)

ACT II. .. The Library at the Chateau de Vercottes, two days later (*Johnstone*)

ACT III. .. Same as Act I., the next morning.

The Play Produced by E. DAGNALL.

Dresses by MADAME ALEXANDRA, BAKER STREET, W.
Miss ETHEL DANE'S Hat by MAISON LEWIS, REGENT STREET, W.

PRECEDED AT 8.15 BY
THE TATTLERS
(Under the Direction of LOUIS RIHLL).

1. OPENING CHORUS	.. .. .	THE TATTLERS.	.. .. .	Wolseley Charles
2. SONG AND CHORUS	.. .. .	"Cold Time"	.. .. .	Philip Braham
3. ENSEMBLE	.. .. .	DORA DOLARO, "Hello, Little Girl" THE TATTLERS.	.. .. .	Wolseley Charles
4. SKETCH AT THE PIANO	.. .. .	WOLSELEY CHARLES.	.. .. .	Wolseley Charles
5. HUMOROUS SONG	.. .. .	"A Tale of the Twopenny Tube" LOUIS RIHLL.	.. .. .	Fordwyck
6. ENSEMBLE	.. .. .	"Nothing to do with You" THE TATTLERS.	.. .. .	Wolseley Charles

PIANO BY CRAMER.

PROGRAMME OF MUSIC under the Direction of Mr. LOUIS HILLIER.

Before Act I.	{ a. "Chant sans Paroles"	Tchatskowsky
	{ b. "Valse Septembre"	Godin
Before Act II.	.. SUITE, "Ballet Egyptien"	Luigini
Before Act III.	.. SELECTION, "La Boheme"	Puccini

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Extract from the Rules made by the Lord Chamberlain n. 1.—The name of the actual and responsible Manager of the Theatre must be printed on every playbill. 2.—The Public can leave the Theatre at the end of the performance by all exit and entrance doors, which must open outwards. 3.—Where there is a drop-scur screen to the proscenium opening it must be lowered at least once during every performance, to ensure its being in proper working order. 4.—Smoking is not permitted in the Auditorium. 5.—All gangways, passages and staircases must be kept free from chairs or any other obstructions, whether permanent or temporary.

Figure 2. Programme for *The Glad Eye* first performed in London at the Globe Theatre on 4 November 1911. The *Tattlers* provided the curtain-raiser with Wolseley Charles, Dora Dolaro, and Louis Rihll as the principal artists. *Mander and Mitchenson / University of Bristol / ArenaPAL*

A cursory comparison of the style and content of the entertainment offered by Pélissier's *Follies* in 1910 with that of the *Tatlers* in 1911 is sufficient to conclude that the latter made no attempt to emulate the former. The *Follies* programme usually consisted of a full evening of musical entertainment in different parts, concluding with Pélissier's famous 'Potted Pageant'.¹¹ The *Tatlers* by comparison was much shorter in length, offering scope for little more than simple, light-hearted entertainment that started with an opening chorus, followed by individual and 'concerted' vocal turns (that is with more than one artist), and concluding with an ensemble. This was a typical concert party format. The 'running order', or sequence of song and sketch, so vital in topical and satirical revue, was of far less significance in the concert party type of entertainment of this period. Further, if the creative force of the *Tatlers* was Louis Rihll, then their musical lynchpin was Wolseley Charles, a child prodigy, whose quality of compositions and flair in delivery, contributed enormously to their success (*Daily Mirror*, 18 Feb. 1914: 5). The *Tatlers* were so impressive in this early London venture that even the usually conservative *Times* (3 Sep. 1912: 6), in conclusion to a review of *The Glad Eye*, remarked "Visitors to the Strand Theatre should bear in mind that such a curtain-raiser as the Pierrot entertainment presented by the Strand Tatlers is too good to be missed on account of late arrival".¹² A tour of *The Glad Eye* with the *Tatlers* followed between February and April 1913, visiting Torquay, Plymouth, Aldershot, Portsmouth and Southampton. Although the first, the *Tatlers* were by no means alone in being used as Pierrot curtain-raisers to West End plays. Louis Meyer introduced R. B. Salisbury's *Quaints* as curtain-raiser to Jocelyn Brandon and Frederic Arthur's farce, *The Chaperon*, at the Strand in 1913 (*Stage*, 1 May 1913: 22; *Daily Express*, 10 May 1913: 10), and as curtain-raiser to Alfred Sutro's comedy *The Clever Ones* at Wyndham's in 1914 (*Stage*, 30 Apr. 1914: 27). The *Quaints* also presented *The Pedlar of Dreams*, a 'revue fantasy', at the Vaudeville, which filled the whole bill in 1915 (*Stage*, 23 Dec. 1915: 20).

It was on 26 December 1912 at the Strand Theatre in London when the amalgamation of two concert parties into a single entity first occurred, this being the joint brainchild of Louis Rihll and Wolseley Charles. Capitalising on their earlier London exposure, and with the addition of Rihll's sister, the beautiful Joan Ritz, the *Tatlers* combined with Charles' newly-formed *Scamps* concert party (which included Dolaro, Burney, and Henson who with Charles had earlier defected from the *Tatlers*) to create a show called *Nicely, Thanks!*. Billed as a 'Venture in Vaudeville' in two parts, Rihll and Charles' artistic union provided the framework for a more sophisticated entertainment, one which proved an immediate success with London and provincial audiences alike over a period of two years (*Stage*, 10 Dec. 1914: 13). Wolseley Charles was once again responsible for the musical compositions, playing on the double-grand piano with Patrick Thayer. *Nicely, Thanks!* was also coincidentally Leslie Henson's first appearance in the West End (Henson *Yours Faithfully*, 30). The show was subsequently transferred to the Comedy, running for a total of forty-one performances (Wearing 1982, 1: 301). Of the first performance, the *Times* (27 Dec. 1912: 8) remarked "To follow in the footsteps of the Follies and the Grotesques is no easy task, but this the Scamps and the Tatlers have done successfully, because while the style of entertainment is old, the material is refreshingly new". It concluded "When *The Glad Eye* runs its course, Mr. Meyer could do worse than put *Nicely, Thanks*, into an evening bill". A full-page advert in the *Daily Express* (28 Dec. 1912: 8) published extracts from no less than twelve reviews in London newspapers – "Triumph at the Strand Theatre" (*Standard*); "New Vaudeville Triumph at the Strand" (*Evening Standard*); "The greatest thing of its kind ever seen in London" (*Evening News*) - emphasising its spectacular success. Despite the defection of Charles, Dolaro, Burney and Henson from the *Tatlers*, a fact-of-life in the milieu of the concert party world, no legacy of ill-feeling was apparent given Rihll's long-standing partnership with Charles and the other former *Tatlers*. In any event, a new party was quickly formed by Rihll which

comprised Cynthia Cooper (who had replaced Christine Roy), Pattie O’Hanlon (a patron of the Concert Artists Benevolent Association), Kathleen Murray, Mason Wood, Percy Stanhope, and Robert Ballmar. Cooper, who originally came from the *Philanderers* concert party (*Stage*, 22 Jun. 1911: 20), was one of Rihll’s most valuable acquisitions, and the longest serving of his many *Tatlers* artists. The *Stage* (18 Jul. 1918: 6) once described her as “bright, vivacious, [and] rather more talented than the average concert party comedienne . . . a comedy actress to her finger-tips [who] assumes her various characters with ease”. She and Rihll were considered “a starring pair in combined work” (*Liverpool Echo*, 11 May. 1917: 2).

Programmes for *Nicely, Thanks!* permit a brief analysis of its format. The play-script however, which might have revealed so much more, could not be located in the Lord Chamberlain’s play manuscripts (hereafter LCP) for the granting of a performance licence.¹³ The first part of the entertainment began with a Military Quintette, “The Captain and Private” (with Burney, Wood, Henson, Charles, and Rihll), followed by four individual songs, one humorous duet “Our Dear Little Y.M.V.A.” (with Rihll and Henson), one humorous quartette “Oh, Mr. Editor” (with Cooper, Dolaro, O’Hanlon, and Ritz), one humorous song (Rihll), and two ensembles, the second of which was a ragtime burlesque “Zig-a-Zags” performed before the interval. The second half was mostly taken up with Charles’ burlesque oratorio which provided the template for his later burlesque pieces *The Village Choir* (1925) and *Handelian Oratorio* (1930). Henson remarked that had his suggestion of adding “ten pretty girls to back up the band of twelve principal players” been taken up then *Nicely, Thanks!* would have made history as the first intimate revue seen in London, which, he considered “it was in actual composition”, but, “As things happened, however, it remained a Concert Party Show, and a very good one” (Henson *My Last Laugh*, 133). He also credited the burlesque oratorio with having a “vital bearing on my [musical comedy] career”. *Nicely, Thanks!* was revived in April 1913 at the Victoria Palace (*Stage*, 24 Apr. 1913: 15),¹⁴ returning to the Strand in July

1913 (*Stage*, 17 Jul. 1913: 17) for afternoon performances (while the *Tatlers* performed in the evening as curtain-raiser to *The Glad Eye*). It visited the King's Hall, Ilkley (*Stage*, 21 Aug. 1913: 7) followed by an autumn tour (November 1913 – March 1914) which included Edinburgh, Liverpool, London, Brighton, Nottingham, Manchester, Leeds,¹⁵ Aberdeen, and Hull. Of their performance at the Hippodrome (Manchester), the *Manchester Courier* (20 Jan. 1914: 5) remarked "It is almost pure pierrot . . . the kindly fooling to which Pélissier accustomed us. As such it is excellent and occasionally brilliant. But it is not revue". An advert for *Nicely, Thanks!* at the Tivoli, Hull, even suggested (tongue-in-cheek or no) that "The Follies" had been "Out-Follied" (*Hull Daily Mail*, 30 Mar. 1914: 4).¹⁶ The composition of the *Nicely, Thanks!* touring party included twelve artists, but when performing in London, Henson added to the number [Figure 3]. The successful run of *Nicely, Thanks!* approached its end in January 1915 at the Royal Hippodrome, Belfast, and the Theatre Royal, Dublin (*Stage*, 21 Jan. 1915: 18). It was also during the tour of *Nicely, Thanks!* that Leslie Henson managed to encourage the rising comedian Stanley Holloway (1890-1982) to join the party (Henson *Yours Faithfully*, 32), a fact noted in Holloway's autobiography (50, 68, 290).



Figure 3. A photo of the thirteen artists from *Nicely, Thanks!* taken from a publicity pamphlet for a performance at the Comedy Theatre, London, on 4 February 1913.¹⁷ Artists who can be positively identified are Louis Rihll (far left), Wolseley Charles (second from left), and Leslie Henson (far right). The other artists are Joan Ritz, Cynthia Cooper, Dora Dolaro, Betty Hyde, Pattie O’Hanlon, Herbert Burney, Jackson Potter, Mason Wood, Penyston Miles, and Patrick Thayer. *V&A Images / Victoria and Albert Museum*

It was not uncommon for concert parties to tour colonies overseas, India, the Far East, South Africa and the Antipodes in particular being financially lucrative destinations with large ex-patriot communities. Less common, and considered generally more challenging in this respect, was South America (*Stage*, 1 May 1919: 19). In 1915 such an opportunity arose for Louis Rihll, a time in the shadow of the Great War which had started nine months previously with a resultant depression in alfresco business at the holiday resorts (*Stage*, 13 Aug. 1914: 8). Rihll appears as a passenger on the Royal Mail Steam Packet ship ‘Avon’ which sailed on 9 April 1915 from Liverpool to Buenos Aires with a group of ten theatrical artists (National Archives, Outward Passenger Lists, BT 27/859). Notable in this group was Stanley Holloway (accompanied by his first wife Alice), the *Tatlers* long-serving comedian Guy Fane (1892-1976), and the tenor Harry Frankiss. The party, a companion troupe of the original *Grotesques* concert party, had been especially formed specifically for the tour (Pulling 150-51; Holloway 54-55). This had been arranged through the impresario and theatrical manager Maurice E. Bandman (1873-1922). According to a newspaper article that offered in addition a rare profile (and thumbnail photo) of Rihll (*Derby Daily Telegraph*, 28 Apr. 1926: 4), it was he who had taken the troupe to Buenos Aires, and was therefore effectively the tour manager. One month before their departure the party had enjoyed a season at Eastbourne with nine artists (*Stage*, 11 Mar. 1915: 5), five of whom (Rihll, Holloway, Fane, Leonard Ments, and Katie Yates) went to South America. Notable among the artists who remained were Cynthia Cooper and another of the *Tatlers*, the pianist-entertainer Jack Granville, who in the 1930s was Stanley Holloway’s musical director and accompanist. The tour included a stop at Valparaiso in Chile where Holloway was released from his contract, leaving at Iquique further up the coast, and thence to England. Holloway however, in an extraordinary lapse of memory, despite Rihll’s agreement (through Henson) to include him in *Nicely, Thanks!*, not to mention their joint venture in South America, and

Rihll's later involvement with the *Co-Optimists* (of which Holloway was then a member), makes no explicit reference to his early benefactor in his autobiography, except indirectly when referring to "another troupe called The Tatlers" (290).¹⁸ Rihll and the remainder of the touring party (now minus Holloway) arrived back at Bristol from Port Limón, Costa Rica, on 24 October 1915 (National Archives, Inwards Passenger Lists, BT 26/601/98). The following year Rihll re-joined his *Tatlers* for a summer tour which included Rhyl, Exmouth, New Brighton, and Rock Ferry, after which he was a principal artist in Henson's revue *How's Your Father; Or, Any Complaints?* performed at the Garrison Theatre, Park Hall Camp, Oswestry on 16 November 1916 for the entertainment of troops stationed there (*Stage Year Book*, 1917: 125; Dean 25-26). Other artists of note in this show included Davy Burnaby (1881-1949) and Melville Gideon (1884-1933), both of future *Co-Optimists* fame, the tenor Henri Leoni, and Cynthia Cooper, the long-serving *Tatlers* comedienne and raconteur.

In 1917, while a companion party of *Tatlers* toured, a new part-amalgamation of concert parties occurred between Rihll's principal *Tatlers* artists and those of the *Scamps* in an entertainment named *Fragments* (*Liverpool Echo*, 9 Nov. 1917: 4; 14 Dec. 1917: 4). Written by Louis Rihll and the comedian-librettist Stanley C. West (1880-1962), with music by John Ansell, it was described as "A musical pot-pourri of comedy, dance, farce, and burlesque" (or, "An original revue of Bits and Pieces"). It was structured along *Nicely, Thanks!* 'burlesque revuette' lines, but with a smaller party. It was only performed in Liverpool, first at the Playhouse twice daily (dovetailed with Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) over two successive Christmas seasons from Boxing Day up to 19 January 1918, and thereafter at the Winter Gardens, New Brighton from 21 January (*Liverpool Echo*, 18 Jan. 1918: 4). Its original (simpler) format consisted of two parts. In the first were mainly solo and concerted vocal items ("The First Royal Petticoat Army", "Tilts and sallies at the expense of our fighting men, from the colonel downwards", "A History of Fashions told in

Song”), and in the second, a “panoramic representation of famous Dickens’ characters”, *What the Dickens! A Christmas Phantasy*. Of the opening matinee performance on Saturday 22 December, the *Liverpool Echo* (24 Dec. 1917: 2) commented that it “instinctively carried one back to the days of seaside holidays, in the seeming long ago, when we were regaled by our friends the pierrots with song, jest, story, and dance”. It was however no more than a Pierrot performance, although certainly “a good remove from the average pierrot show”. Pélissier’s *Follies* were well remembered here so that a new interpretation of the Pierrot theme proved popular with audiences (*Liverpool Echo*, 21 Dec. 1917: 3). The artists in *Fragments* (apart from Rihll) included Cynthia Cooper, Marion Ord (soprano), Ivy Popham (soubrette), Lorna Raymond (contralto), Chris Botly (baritone), Fred Curtis (comedian), Stanley West, and Davy Burnaby (*Stage*, 27 Dec. 1917: 8). Following a return trip of the *Tatlers* to Liverpool in the summer of 1918 (*Liverpool Echo*, 21 Jun. 1918: 3), *Fragments* returned for a further Christmas season in November 1918, this time fortified with Joan Ritz. This second version of *Fragments* offered a completely re-designed format (with chorus), described as a “thoroughly co-ordinated revue in which exceptional scope is given for scenes in which music and comedy abounds” (*Liverpool Echo*, 20 Dec. 1918: 2). The local press was to later describe it as “a musicomedial Kaleidoscopera in Nine Splinters”, and noted that in “The Song of the Tinker” Rihll’s portrayal of the old tinker “was a clever and faithful piece of acting” (*Liverpool Echo*, 27 Dec. 1918: 2). The descriptive term ‘Splinters’ in fact alludes to a bizarre attribute of the revised version performed at the Playhouse in 1918 which comprised two acts with numerous scenes. The details are revealed in the play-script submitted to the censor who described it as “An odd kind of parody of the conventional revue” (LCP 1918/23 No. 1943). *Fragments* was well-named and refers to the fragments (hence “Bits and Pieces”) which resulted from the exploding of a bomb by an “Ancient one experimenting for new lines of fun” who sings “To find new source of merriment / Sit I in deep experiment . . . / I seek

new plots – new jokes, new gags / The best we have are worn to rags / And most were old when I was young / And bow before the public strung”. Act 1 runs to sixteen pages of script, and Act 2, eleven pages. Of interest also is the Finale of the “Four Seasons” which was included in Rihll’s later creation, *Pedlar’s Pie*. In summary, the censor remarked “Much of it is sheer nonsense but some of it conveys hints of satire, notably in its profuse topical allusions. There is no offence either in its hazy motive or its chaotic development”. *What the Dickens!*, which constituted the second part of the entertainment, required a licence of its own, and in the play-script (a total of 22 pages) is referred to by the authors as a “revuette”. Apart from “a solitary instance of bad taste”, the censor remarked “the piece is pretty and pleasant” (LCP 1917/25 No. 1294).

Louis Rihll’s partnership with Charles Heslop lasted just short of three years, formed it seems in recognition of the still great opportunities for more pierrotic entertainments in the provinces (*Stage*, 13 May 1920: 13), a niche they filled successfully. On the face of it, theirs was a largely business coalition. The strands of friendship which existed between Rihll, Charles and Henson, are not so apparent in Heslop’s case. He and Rihll rarely acted together, being seen only briefly with the *Brownies* in 1919, their *Patchwork* entertainment in 1920, and in Rihll’s brother-in-law Percy Nash’s March 1920 silent film version of Harold Brighouse’s play *Hobson’s Choice*.¹⁹ Instead they ran their own concert parties independently while collaborating on new entertainments, all under the banner of ‘Heslop-Rihll Vaudeville Variations’ (*Stage*, 17 Feb. 1921: 7) [Figure 4]. It is revealing that in the many articles written by Heslop, including his various obituaries (*Times*, 15 Apr. 1966: 15; *Stage*, 21 Apr. 1966: 8), his early association with Louis Rihll is never mentioned. The reason for this is not difficult to surmise. Heslop outlived Rihll by thirty-five years and so his partnership with the latter was probably seen by him (and his obituary writers) as of little consequence, but was perhaps, in retrospect, of greater significance to Rihll in the totality of his much shorter

career. Their work together occurred over a discrete period which started in 1919 with the appearance of a joint advertisement for the auditioning of artists for tours and resident seasons (*Stage*, 20 Feb. 1919: 7). The new entertainment was called *Nonsense*. It was not a true concert party conflation (e.g. the *Tatlers* and Heslop's *Brownies* combined) of the type seen previously, nor did Rihll or Heslop take part. The initial touring party of *Nonsense* however included a number of well-known artists: the comedian Guy Fane, the pianist-entertainer (later, actor-manager) Reginald Selleck (1899-1958), as well as a second comedian and mimic from *Fragments*, Fred Curtis. Its artists however changed considerably over time and later included Bert Earle (comedian), Dolly Richardson (comedienne), Florence Clare (comedienne), the former *Tatler* Billie Dixon, Claude Russell (piano), Robert Dennant (baritone), and Eric Barber (producer). *Nonsense*, whose conclusion was always the burlesque concerted rendering "The Village Dramatic Society", opened at the West Cliff Gardens, Clacton, for a resident season (*Stage*, 19 Jun. 1919: 8). It continued its run into 1920 and 1921 with visits to the North Pier, Blackpool (*Stage*, 10 Jun. 1920: 3), the Gaiety, Ilfracombe (*Stage*, 17 Jun. 1920: 16; 30 Jun. 1921: 6), Bohemia, Broadstairs (*Stage*, 16 Sep. 1920: 8), the Pier Pavilion, Penarth (*Stage*, 26 May. 1921: 6), and the South Parade Pier, Southsea (*Stage*, 14 Jul. 1921: 5). The run of *Nonsense* ended with a resident season at Broadstairs (*Stage*, 22 Sep. 1921: 8). No programmes have been found for *Nonsense*, and no play-script exists for it in the LCP either, so that analysis of its format is not possible.

The independent nature of the Heslop-Rihll alliance is exemplified by the fact that while *Nonsense* was appearing at Broadstairs in 1920, so too was Heslop's *Pierrot Pie* entertainment at the same venue (*Stage*, 16 Sep. 1920: 8). Further, while *Nonsense* was at Penarth, another party of *Tatlers* (with Rihll) secured a most unusual engagement at Aix-le-Bains in eastern France between 9 and 23 May (*Stage*, 19 May 1921: 22), before returning for an engagement at Lowestoft a week later (*Stage*, 26 May 1921: 6). The *Tatlers* shortly after

also took a new direction, but only temporarily. Although the name ‘Bits and Pieces’ had been originally conceived with Herbert Burney as part of *Fragments*, from June 1919, Rihll took the revue and created a variant revue from it called *Bits and Pieces*. This combined the *Tatlers* (Louis Rihll, Stanley West, Jack Granville, Cedric Connolly, Cynthia Cooper, Elsie Ingle, Billie Dixon, and Vera Doree) with, for the first time, a chorus of six “Tatler Girls” as “Café Lasses, Flapperton Girls, Jazz Rag Girls etc.” (who had been employed previously in *Fragments*), making a total of fourteen artistes (*Hull Daily Mail*, 13 Jun. 1919: 3). *Bits and Pieces* was performed at the Lyric Theatre, Hull, over a period of six months (*Hull Daily Mail*, 5 Nov. 1919: 4). Of its first performance, the *Hull Daily Mail* (17 Jun. 1919: 4) considered *Bits and Pieces* “excellent entertainment . . . [it] bubbles with humour throughout . . . [and] As the gay curate Louis Rihll is perfection”. It is interesting to note that despite this success, Rihll never again added a dancing chorus to his *Tatlers*, except when amalgamated with non-*Tatlers* artists. In the following month, no sooner had the run of the *Tatlers* in *Bits and Pieces* ended at the Lyric than the *Brownies* appeared, this time with Rihll and Heslop playing together in rare concert with Maidie Field, Cynthia Cooper, Noel Leyland, Edmund Gaëton, and Ruth Travers (*Stage*, 4 Dec. 1919: 4).

From January 1920, and concurrent with the run of *Nonsense*, Heslop and Rihll introduced another entertainment called *Patchwork*. Advance advertisements not only stated that it offered a “full chorus” (which was by now the *de facto* required for an acceptable revue), but also emphasised, as a stamp of high quality, that it was “to be carried out on the best of West-end lines in every detail” (*Stage*, 21 Aug. 1919: 21). The target audience however was not the West End but Liverpool (Crane’s Hall and the Winter Gardens, New Brighton) thus capitalising on the success of *Fragments* the year before. The cast included Rihll and Heslop (again in rare combination) together with Maidie Field (by then Heslop’s wife), Cynthia Cooper, Stanley West, and vocalists Ruth Trafford and Vivian Pedlar. It was

another success, the *Stage* (8 Jan. 1920: 12; 15 Jan. 1920: 3) describing it as “a constant presentation of little gems of comedy, character studies, vocalisation, and fine true burlesque”. The nineteen-page play-script for *Patchwork* (‘an entertainment with songs and four scenes’) was submitted to the censor prior to its first performance at the Theatre Royal, Bognor, on 24 December 1919 (LCP 1919/32 No. 2633). The censor remarked that it was “a mixture of various sorts, some pretty sentiment, some satire and some mere fooling . . . Several songs, a few of them pretty and a few clever . . . There is some talent and fancy in the entertainment and it is entirely innocent” (LCP CORR 1919/2633). The end of 1921 marked the end of the Heslop-Rihll partnership, the year that saw the first appearance of the *Co-Optimists* in London (*Stage*, 30 Jun. 1921: 14). In September 1921, Rihll acted in his second silent film, *The Croxley Master*, produced by Percy Nash, from Conan Doyle’s novel. In this film Rihll played Mr Grain to his sister Joan Ritz’s Anastasia Craggs (Gifford, entry 07238).

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Figure 4. Two examples of Heslop-Rihll advertisements which reveal the nature and extent of their business partnership taken from the *Stage*, 29 January 1920: 23 (left) and 29 April 1920: 19 (right). Courtesy of *The Stage*

Rihll's most ambitious and innovative venture came in January 1922 at the Pavilion, Torquay, when he introduced his 'Revue of Character Cameos, Harmony and Burlesque in Twelve Slices and Two Helpings', a creation called *Pedlar's Pie*.²⁰ Rihll's "comedic kaleidoscope" of entertainment (or, "A Joke with a Choke in it"), with music supplied by Frank Armstrong among others, was different in concept and format to anything previously produced. Embellished with a chorus of eight dancers trained by the Italia Conti Academy, it was arguably more advanced in terms of construction and content than the more conventional pierrotic offering of the *Co-Optimists*, whose first London appearance had taken place at the Royalty on Monday 27 June 1921. *Pedlar's Pie* was first toured during the whole of 1922 and for the early part of 1923, with twice-nightly performances at Brighton, Hastings, Balham, New Brighton, Swansea, Nottingham, Southampton, Folkestone, Eastbourne, Exeter, Plymouth, Torquay, Southend, Richmond, Blackpool, Scarborough, Huddersfield, Birkenhead, Putney, and Gloucester. It first appeared in London at the Court Theatre on 2 June 1923 under the joint direction of Rihll and Henson (*Stage Year Book* 1921-25: 177; Wearing 1984, 1: 383) [Figure 5]. In the "Music Box" column of the *Stage* (9 Feb. 1922: 13), the commentator J. M. Glover gave the entertainment the ultimate accolade. Referring to it as the combination which "begins where the others leave off", he concluded that, "It really is a feat to go into a legitimate theatre with a sort of enlarged concert party of eight people and hold the stage for two hours, but this is what happened, and the success was well-deserved".

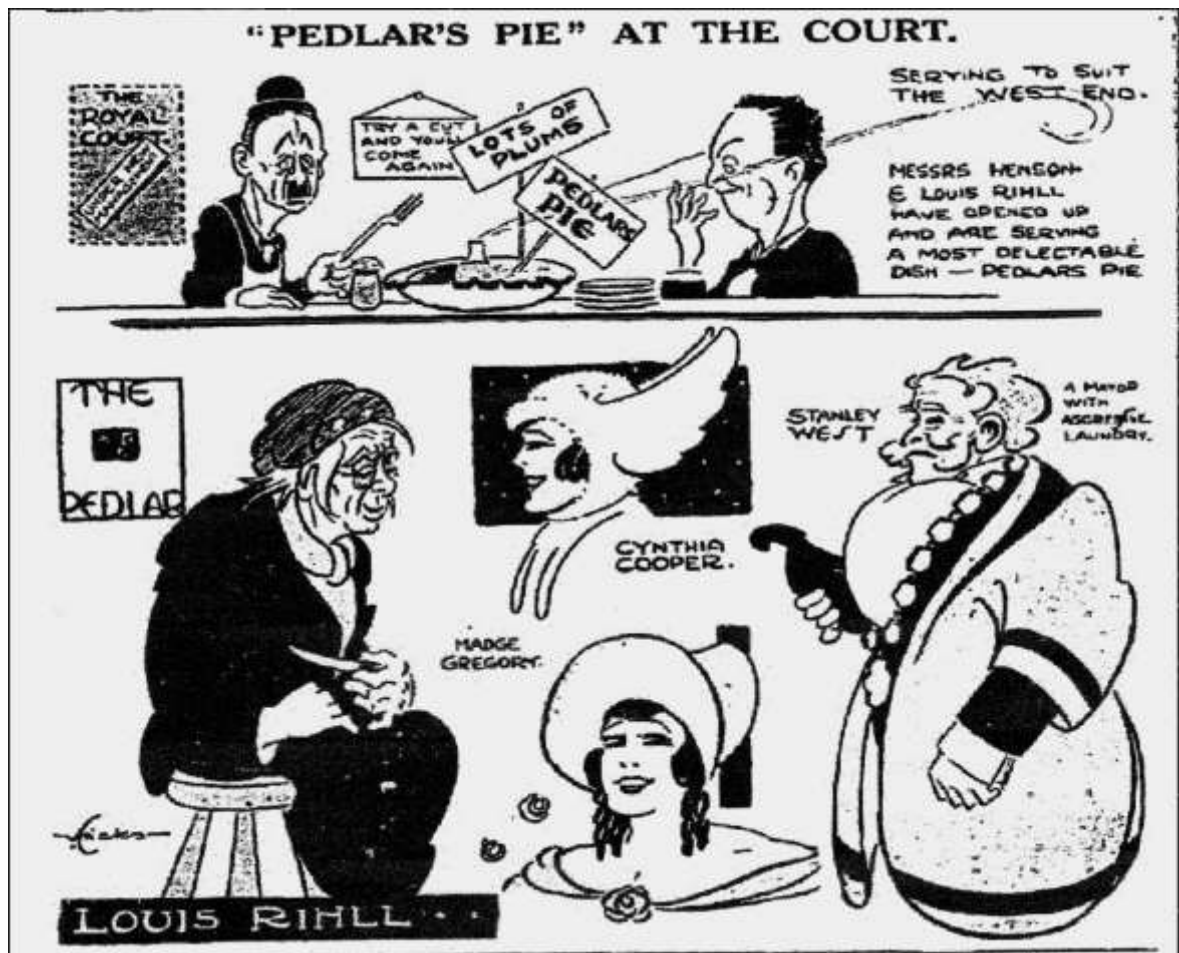


Figure 5. Caricatures of the principal artists in *Pedlar's Pie* with Louis Rihll (as The Pedlar), Cynthia Cooper, Madge Gregory, and Stanley West (*Stage*, 7 Jun. 1923: 16). The other artists included Elsie Ingle, Billie Dixon, Eric Woodburn, Peggy Walsh, Kenneth Solly, and Joan Ritz. The former *Tatler*, Guy Fane, was the Business Manager, and J. C. Holliday the Musical Director. Courtesy of *The Stage*

Pedlar's Pie was structured in two 'Helpings', and within each were six 'Slices'. A transcription of the Court Theatre programme for 7 June 1923 is presented below to give an idea of the entertainment:

FIRST HELPING

Slice 1 **"In the Observatory"**
 "What makes the World round?" Music by Armstrong
 "Life's Follies" Music by Marjorie Broughton
 Mirth Madge Gregory
 Love Elsie Ingle
 Song Billie Dixon
 Wine Cynthia Cooper

The Arrival of the Pedlar of Mirth

The Pedlar of Mirth Louis Rihll

Slice 2 **"An Old Egyptian Opera"** Music by Armstrong
 Erasmie Eric Woodburn
 Sapolio Louis Rihll
 Sanitas Madge Gregory
 Linoleum Billie Dixon
 Ronuk Stanley West
 Ippekakuanna Cynthia Cooper
 Kiwi Kenneth Solly

Slice 3 **"Little Papoose"** Music by Lawrence
 Peggy Walsh

Slice 4 **"A Lullaby with Orchestral Accompaniment"**
 M. Bowough (Conductor) Eric Woodburn
 Signor Spitta (Cymbalis) Stanley West
 Dr. T. Dogge (Drummer) Louis Rihll
 Senorita Bombazzina (Prima Donna) Cynthia West

Slice 5 **"An Invitation to Smoke"** Music by Pat(rick) Thayer
 (Look out for your "Kensitas" Cigarettes as smoked by the Artistes).

Slice 6 **Louis Rihll makes a search for Talent**

INTERVAL

SECOND HELPING

- Slice 7** **“Harmony in the Gutter”** Music by Armstrong
- Slice 8** **”The Song of the Tinker”** Music by Armstrong
The Tinker Louis Rihll
The Servant Cynthia Cooper
The Policeman Eric Woodburn
The Wild Man Stanley West
The Flower Girl Joan Ritz
- Slice 9** **“Cupid in Starch and Corduroy”** Music by Ivimey
Lounger Lal Eric Woodburn
Starch Nell Elsie Ingle
- Slice 10** **“Songs that Live”**
Madge Gregory
- Slice 11** **“A Bit of Burlesque”**
- Slice 12** **“The Four Seasons”** Music by Reginald Selleck
Allegorical Actual
Spring Elsie Ingle Kenneth Solly
Summer Billie Dixon Eric Woodburn
Autumn Madge Gregory Stanley West
Winter Cynthia Cooper Louis Rihll

Enthusiastic reviews followed *Pedlar’s Pie* everywhere while on tour. The *Stage* (16 Feb. 1922: 11), remarking on the performance at the Hippodrome, Balham, stated “In these days, when audiences are sometimes inclined to become tired of spectacular display at the expense of individual effort, it is refreshing to come across so clever a company, small in number, but eminently capable . . . Louis Rihll is an experienced comedian, whose work throughout marks him as an artist of high attainment”. Liverpool also was “taken by storm”, and at Brighton, *Pedlar’s Pie* provided “just one banquet of entertainment” (*Stage*, 23 Feb. 1922: 18). At the Theatre Royal, Plymouth, it was considered “one of the most witty and genuinely amusing shows . . . Louis Rihll and company . . . proved most excellent artists. The entertainment is full of mirth and melody” (*Western Morning News & Mercury*, 6 May 1922: 7). Of the performance at the Hippodrome, Gloucester, the *Gloucester Journal* (24 Jun. 1922: 1)

remarked, “Audiences in various parts of the country have endorsed the view that the piece constitutes ‘a new form of entertainment with an irresistible public appeal’ ”. *Pedlar’s Pie* was rebooked for a three week return visit to Gloucester in 1923 of which the *Gloucester Citizen* (30 Jun. 1923: 5) commented, “There is no company that has ever visited Gloucester which has aroused such a very wide interest as Louis Rihll’s ‘Pedlar’s Pie’ . . . [It] is full of life and atmosphere . . . [of] flippant satire, up-to-date burlesque, and fantastic humour”. It further reminded readers that on their last visit to Gloucester in June 1922 “This wonderful combination of talented artistes [was] practically unknown [but] created a reputation which impelled many to visit the Hippodrome four or five times during the week. It continued “For twelve years Louis Rihll has been experimenting and striving to put before the public a form of entertainment that . . . shall not neglect the artistic essentials of its kind . . . many now famous people, including the incomparable Leslie Henson, began their professional career under his management”. Of their performance at the Hippodrome, Putney, the *Stage* (7 Dec. 1922: 12) remarked “Pedlar’s Pie is novel in its construction and arrangement . . . At the head of affairs is Louis Rihll, an artist of parts [who] displays versatility by successfully negotiating broad comedy scenes as well as quieter incidents of a humorous character . . . The elegance of its production, the charm of its music . . . and the smartness of its interpreters, are things that stamp it as a piece out of the ordinary, and one fitted to find a place in the West End”. At the Hippodrome, Woolwich, Louis Rihll was in particular praised: “An excellent comedian is seen in Louis Rihll, whose character studies of the Pedlar [“The Pedlar of Mirth”], Sapolio [“An Old Egyptian Opera”], and the Tinker [“The Song of the Tinker”], are well sustained and never fail in effect . . . the revue is a joyous and pleasing production” (*Stage*, 14 Dec. 1922: 13). The accolades continued and at the Hippodrome, Nottingham, *Pedlar’s Pie* was considered a “refined, amusing, and in some measure artistic production . . . Mr Rihll has organised a company, small in number, but possessing

exceptional attainments and versatility . . . [it] is a welcome departure from the ordinary type of revue and an entertainment of considerable merit” (*Nottingham Evening Post*, 27 Feb. 1923: 6). *Pedlar’s Pie* ran to three versions (the final being shown at Gloucester), its eight artists impersonating no less than sixty-four characters.

In stark contrast to its provincial success however, which included reviews that confidently predicted success in London, it ran for only fifteen performances at the Court to mixed critical reception. The *Times* (4 Jun. 1923: 10) commented rather sarcastically that *Pedlar’s Pie* “is not intended to be an ambitious dish, but even as an example of plain cooking it is not very satisfying. On the programme it is described as an ‘original dish’, but it must be confessed that many of the ingredients are very old indeed”. It concluded that it is “hardly a dish to set before a King”. The *Daily Express* (4 Jun. 1923: 3) suggested some measure of success had been achieved but qualified this by remarking, “London audiences are proverbially kind, and ‘Pedlar’s Pie’ . . . owed not a little of its success to the tolerant friendliness of the audience . . . The piece [is] a hotch-potch of nonsense and sentiment . . . [with] some good character sketches”. The *Daily Mirror* (4 Jun. 1923: 19) went further in its critique of *Pedlar’s Pie*’s mixed reception with the headline “Baked with Mysteriously Mixed Ingredients at the Court Theatre”. Despite its appeal in the provinces, and accepting that Rihll was a “conscientious comedian”, it remarked, it had proved “indigestible” to a West End audience. Recalling the earlier success of *Nicely, Thanks!*, and the discovery of Leslie Henson [by Rihll], it nevertheless concluded, “At the present time Mr. Rihll seems out of luck as a discoverer of talent”. The *Stage* (7 Jun. 1923: 16) was more upbeat, considering that “it proved diverting”, and that Henson, “the popular comedian”, was taking the opportunity of giving “his old friend” assistance in the present venture. It suggested that it enjoyed a “fairly encouraging send off . . . from the opening ‘slice’ in the first ‘helping’ onwards”. The *Era* (6 Jun. 1923: 11) however was neutral on the production commenting that

it “may not be full of plums, but it has a few good things in it”. It continued “One of the best is the old tinker scena of Mr. Louis Rihll . . . a capitally written and rendered number”. Given neither Rihll’s expectations for *Pedlar’s Pie* in London, nor his explanation for its short run, are recorded, he would have been well aware of two developments in the West End that might have had a bearing on matters. First was the already unassailable position of the *Co-Optimists* as far as Pierrot-type shows were concerned (although they were not performing in London at this particular time). Second were the already prevalent intimate revues offered by the likes of the well-established C. B. Cochran and André Charlot. There were also other forms of entertainment such as were being offered by the Russian acting troupe, *Chauve Souris*, an international ‘import’, exemplifying the transnational nature of an emerging popular culture in the metropolis. *Pedlar’s Pie* however was neither a Pierrot show nor a ‘conventional’ revue with chorus. Rihll’s attempt at presenting his brand of organised chaos was a brave though ultimately unsuccessful venture which perhaps came to the West End too late to establish a niche for itself. By contrast, in the provincial context, where audience attachment to the Pierrot theme was traditionally strong, *Pedlar’s Pie* was nevertheless seen in a completely different light. The reasons for this dichotomy of reception are not immediately clear but it may reveal a set of virtues lost or wasted on critics and audiences of the metropolis, or simply that Rihll was better known, and his reputation for innovation better appreciated, in the provinces. *Pedlar’s Pie* was certainly a radical departure from *Nicely, Thanks!* (which Glover, in the article referred to earlier, described as a “glorified species of Pélissier’s Follies”) being more complex in structure but achieved with only eight as compared with twelve artists. The play-script for *Pedlar’s Pie* submitted to the censor (a total of over thirty pages) refers to an intended production at the Spa Theatre, Scarborough on 25 September 1922 (LCP 1922/25 No. 4418), some nine months after its first outing. The central theme is “what makes the world go round” with the opening chant of ‘Old Greybeards’

reciting: “Here in solemn conclave met, let us now debate . . . deliberate . . . prognosticate”.

Louis Rihll plays the ‘Prime Minister of Mirth’, a title changed in the Court Theatre version to the ‘Pedlar of Mirth’, but in many other respects it was similar to its earlier form. The concluding Slice 12, “The Four Seasons”, was incorporated from the earlier *Fragments* entertainment, as previously noted. Of *Pedlar’s Pie*, the censor remarked “The first part of this production consists of nonsensical dialogue and songs . . . The second part is more intelligible . . . It is all harmless” (LCP CORR 1922/4418). Rihll allowed *Pedlar’s Pie* to be produced by Reginald Selleck in partnership with the actor Charles Chamier (*Stage*, 3 Dec. 1925: 29), an arrangement which continued until 1928. The Selleck-Chamier version of *Pedlar’s Pie* was effectively a re-invention and re-branding of the original (*Stage*, 11 Feb. 1926: 25). It retained a dancing chorus, and although it was never produced in the West End, it also proved a hit in the provinces like its precursor. In an advertisement for the Selleck-Chamier version the *Brighton Herald* was quoted to remark “ ‘Pedlar’s Pie’ is a masterpiece of theatrical confectionery such as the most experienced chefs of the profession seldom turn out” (*Stage*, 11 Mar. 1926: 27). Included in the play-script of *Pedlar’s Pie* originally submitted to the censor in 1922 is an additional play-script, “The Millionaire”, a sketch in one act by Stanley West, which was included in Selleck and Chamier’s version of *Pedlar’s Pie* from April 1926.

It is interesting, perhaps revealing, that while Henson refers to *Nicely, Thanks!* in his two autobiographies (*My Last Laugh*, 132-34, 141; *Yours Faithfully*, 31-32, 34), there are no references to *Pedlar’s Pie* even though he was involved in the Court production. This is unfortunate since his insight would have proved invaluable. Louis Rihll revived *Pedlar’s Pie* for a tour of the principal resorts in 1930 which included the famous Sparrow’s Nest in Lowestoft (*Stage*, 10 Jul. 1930: 20; *Lowestoft Journal*, 16 Aug. 1930: 4). The eight artists (in addition to Louis Rihll) came mainly from the *Tatlers* and included Stanley West, Audrey

Hyslop (1883-1955) the comedienne (and later, lyric and script writer for the Windmill Theatre), Eric Mason (1897-1977) the ventriloquist, conjuror and noted magician, singers Joan Farrell and Cicely James (the latter originally of the *Scamps*, and later of the *Co-Optimists*), and baritone Martin Boddy. Wolseley Charles, who had been playing with the resuscitated *Co-Optimists*, was present merely (as the *Stage* remarked) “for auld acquaintance sake” on the double-grand piano with Kenneth Walton (21 Aug. 1930: 17). In the latter article, the *Stage* also related the justification of Rihll’s claim that in the making of *Pedlar’s Pie* “brains are considered of more importance than spectacular ingenuity, and humour is not subservient to the gyrations of well-drilled choruses”.

Louis Rihll had been a leading light in the concert party world for nearly two decades. It is therefore ironic that his first major theatrical venture under a management not of his own was in Irving Caesar, Ivan Youmans, Otto Harbach and Frank Mandel’s musical comedy hit *No, No, Nanette* (*Stage*, 1 Jan 1925: 24; *Ganzl* 2: 1063-64), an event which occurred only five years before Rihll’s death. This was a significant departure for Rihll, one that demonstrated what he might have achieved in his later career had he not died before his time. The first tour of *No, No, Nanette* (as principal company of three under the Macdonald and Young management) opened at the Aquarium, Yarmouth, on 20 July 1925 for six nights where Rihll played the lead role of Jimmy Smith, a millionaire Bible publisher, to Edna Bellonini’s *Nanette* (*Stage*, 9 Jul. 1925: 14; *Yarmouth Mercury*, 18 Jul. 1925: 4, 7). Rihll subsequently toured with *No, No, Nanette* in 1926, part of 1927, and in 1929 (to the *Nanette* of Valerie Hay-Austin).²¹ In a revealing (and rare) interview with a provincial newspaper while on tour, Rihll was asked “Do you want to return to concert party?” to which he replied “Oh I suspect I shall go back to it some day, but it is much harder work than musical comedy. In fact, concert party is the hardest kind of work I know, that is why it is such valuable experience” (*Derby Daily Telegraph*, 26 Apr. 1926: 4). Such was the success of *No, No, Nanette* that its coverage

in the provincial press was widespread, and always positive about Rihll's interpretation of Jimmy Smith (*Hull Daily Mail*, 3 Jan. 1929: 9; *Nottingham Evening Post*, 2 Aug. 1929: 4). Of his performance at the Exeter Theatre Royal, the *Stage* (12 Sep. 1929: 21) remarked, "Louis Rihll in the part of Jimmy Smith is an excellent actor and his comic work is of a high order". Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson have commented, "Perhaps the musical comedy most associated with the twenties is *No, No, Nanette*; the songs 'Tea for Two' and 'I want to be happy' seem to bestride the decade" (*Musical Comedy*, 31). All available sources however focus exclusively on the London production with the result that surprisingly little is known of its touring history in this country.

Rihll's spell in *No, No, Nanette* in 1927 (during which time the *Tatlers* continued touring in his absence) coincided with the impending disbandment of the original *Co-Optimists*, a story which postdates Sterne and De Bear's account. Although never an official member of the party, Rihll's involvement with them (for which credit has never been due) came at the beginning of 1927 during a critical period immediately prior to their break-up. The trigger was the sudden illness of the comedian Gilbert Childs which recurred over a period of three years leading eventually to his death on 24 September 1931 (*Stage*, 1 Oct. 1931: 11). Childs was an original *Co-Optimist* and thus almost irreplaceable, especially at such short notice. His role required an artist of skill, experience, and reputation; clearly not a job for an ordinary comedian. The management recognised that only one individual fitted this bill at a time of significant dearth of such talent in the variety world and that was Louis Rihll, a choice alluded to by the *Stage* (26 Aug. 1926: 15) without naming him explicitly. Childs recovered briefly, his understudy at that time being Stanley Brightman, the stage director of the *Co-Optimists* (*Stage*, 23 Dec. 1926: 14), but within a few months he fell ill again and Louis Rihll stepped in as his replacement (*Derby Daily Telegraph*, 9 Feb. 1927: 3). Rihll offered his services to the *Co-Optimists*, who were due to start a tour, at a particularly busy

time for him personally as a result of his *No, No, Nanette* commitments. As Childs' replacement, usually opposite Austin Melford or Stanley Holloway in concerted pieces, Rihll was considered "excellent" (*Stage*, 31 Mar. 1927: 10). Rihll's name however never appeared in any advertisements for the *Co-Optimists* productions hence his involvement is little known. Although Childs made subsequent irregular appearances for the *Co-Optimists*, it was Rihll who held his position until their well-publicised break-up (*Stage*, 28 Apr. 1927: 17, 26). The final appearance of the *Co-Optimists* (with Rihll) took place at the Winter Gardens, Margate, on 2 July 1927 (*Stage*, 7 Jul. 1927: 18).

Rihll's penultimate professional appearance was in Wolseley Charles' sketch, *Handelian Oratorio*, performed at the Queen's Theatre, London, on 4 May 1930, in a cast which included Davy Burnaby, Leslie Henson, Stanley Holloway, and the faithful Cynthia Cooper (Wearing 1990, 1: 44; *Era*, 7 May 1930: 6). His very last stage appearance was in a cameo role as the hotel porter in Austin Melford's farce in three acts *Oh, Daddy!* from the original of Franz Arnold and Ernst Bach. The first performance was at Streatham Hill, London, on 17 November 1930, repeated at the Prince's, London, on 27 November 1930 (*Daily Express*, 28 Nov. 1930: 11) before being transferred to Daly's on 2 February 1931 (Wearing 1999, 1: 111-12). Although a small role the *Stage* (4 Dec. 1930: 16) commended Rihll on his "neat little character study". Rihll was also stage manager in the production which saw his former *Tatlers* associate Guy Fane in the role of Godfrey Sampson. The play was produced under the management of Leslie Henson and his then partner Firth Shephard [Figure 6].

PRINCES THEATRE

SHAFTESBURY AVENUE, W.C.2

Licensed by the Lord Chamberlain to WALTER and FREDERICK MELVILLE

EVERY EVENING AT 8.30

MATINEES WEDNESDAY AND SATURDAY AT 2.30

LESLIE HENSON AND FIRTH SHEPHARD

PRESENT

A New Farce

OH, DADDY!

BY

AUSTIN MELFORD

(From the original by FRANZ ARNOLD and ERNST BACH)

Characters in order of appearance:—

Jane Church (<i>Ninon-de-Lys' secretary</i>)	..	NANCIE NIELSON
Hotel Porter	.. ..	LOUIS RIHLL
Linda Pye (<i>Ninon's mother</i>)	.. ..	TONIE BRUCE
Ninon-de-Lys (<i>a celebrated dancer</i>)		HEATHER THATCHER
Count Duval	.. ..	CHARLES STONE
James Ellison	.. ..	FRED HEARNE
Tyldesley Pye (<i>Ninon's step-father</i>)	..	W. H. BERRY
Rupert Boddy	.. ..	ROBERT NAINBY
Emily (<i>a maid</i>)	.. ..	RACHEL FRY
Phyllis Pye (<i>Tyldesley Pye's daughter by his first marriage</i>)		ELIZABETH ALLAN
Billy Crichton (<i>Count Duval's nephew</i>)	... ..	ARNOLD RICHES
	(By courtesy of Alban B. Limpus and Horace Watson)	
Godfrey Sampson (<i>Tyldesley Pye's great-uncle</i>)	..	GUY FANE

The Play Produced by AUSTIN MELFORD

Figure 6. Programme for Austin Melford's farce *Oh Daddy!* produced at the Prince's Theatre on 27 November 1930 under the Leslie Henson-Firth Shephard management. Louis Rihll played the Hotel Porter and also acted as stage manager. Guy Fane, in the role of Godfrey Sampson, was a former member of the *Tatlers* concert party. *Mander and Mitchenson / University of Bristol / ArenaPAL*

For the professional (and semi-professional) artist, concert party was highly competitive and demanding work, with the need to constantly refresh the repertoire an overriding imperative.²² The outwardly simplistic and artistically inconsequential nature of the genre, which no doubt has contributed to its neglect as a subject of serious study, on deeper reflection, in fact belies a surprising diversity and complexity. Louis Rihll, while remaining loyal to his more traditional *Tatlers* format (whose roots remained firmly aligned to the Pierrot tradition), was one of an elite of innovators whose collaborative experiments improved artistic standards of concert party entertainment out of all recognition to the early form. Through his professional networks Rihll helped push boundaries, broadening possibilities and potentialities of the genre, and as a consequence also contributed significantly to the success of the *Co-Optimists*. The latter phenomenon did not happen by chance but was the product of progressive innovation initiated in the early 1900s by Pélissier, and then further developed by pioneers like Louis Rihll. If there were any similarities between the *Follies*, *Co-Optimists*, and the *Tatlers*, it is that they were not primarily troupes plying their spiritual heartland of the seaside resort, like the vast majority were. Instead, they were of a small group that faced the different challenge of performing on the London stage, a migration which afforded them (deservedly or otherwise) the advantage of enhanced kudos over their coastal counterparts.

The ephemerality of the more sophisticated concert party shows (like revue) makes performance restoration almost impossible, but untapped source material exists, in particular within the LCP collection, to enable further exploration of what made such entertainments distinctive and special for the audiences of that period. In an article on the future of summer entertainment in *The Stage Year Book* for 1927, Charles Heslop posed some important questions in these respects, and made some valuable general observations (49-51). Heslop considered concert party entertainment to have reached its zenith in the period 1910-14,²³ but

then came the transformation where better results (and presumably revenues) resulted more from a “combination of adaptable artists” than from “highly talented individualists” leading to the “completely concerted show”. In Heslop’s opinion, this change, with its “imitation revue concepts” and “scenic and accessory ambitions” came at a price. Heslop argued that “concert party is a distinct and difficult branch of the theatrical profession” and that for it to survive “it must return to its true self”, a view reiterated some years later by the comedian Ronald Frankau (1894-1951) in an article on the ‘Modern Concert Party’ (*Stage*, 10 Mar. 1932: 15). There is some evidence that it did, especially during the inter-war period 1919-39 which the late Bill Pertwee described as “The Golden Years of Concert Party” (Pertwee *Beside the Seaside*, 42).

Louis Rihll died on Saturday 31 January 1931 aged 51,²⁴ at the cross-roads of the so-called ‘Gay Twenties’ and ‘Turbulent Thirties’ (Mander and Mitchenson *Musical Comedy*, 29, 31). His death not only occurred at a time of significant change in the nature of popular entertainment, but also when many of his past associates were already well-known, if not household names. Henson and Holloway left autobiographical accounts of their respective careers, those of Henson in particular informing this study to a significant degree. The latter also, seemingly at every opportunity, contributed articles on his Pierrot beginnings (see for example *Era*, 10 Jun. 1931; *Picture Show*, 18 Mar. 1933: 22; *Evening News*, 27 Sep. 1938: 12-13; *Tatler and Bystander*, 31 Mar. 1948: 398). Heslop was interviewed by Pulling for his book published in 1952 (153-54), and offered reminiscences of his *Brownies* in Roses’ book (116-20). Heslop was astute and ambitious, Henson, an out-and-out extrovert, and Charles was idiosyncratic, easy-going and a little wayward. Rihll on the other hand was conscientious, modest, unassuming, and economical with self-publicity. In consequence his achievements have escaped attention, receiving scant regard in earlier works, those of Pulling and Henson being rare exceptions. Rihll has therefore not fared well at the hands of posterity.

If he is remembered at all, as evidenced in his brief obituary (*Stage*, 5 Feb. 1931: 13), it is solely for introducing Leslie Henson to the light comedy stage, a debt which Henson never forgot: “nobody loved me, nobody wanted me – except Mr. Rihll” (Henson *Yours Faithfully*, 22) . But many other artists could thank Rihll for the help he gave them in their early careers. In this respect, and perhaps even more so than his undoubted ability as an actor, comedian and entertainer, Rihll’s most significant contribution to concert party was his ability to scout for and nurture new talent. In the wider context, concert party is often assumed to be a ‘non-theatrical’ genre, only tangentially related to the other theatrical arts. However, in Rihll’s innovations, and those of his associates, are seen confluence of musical comedy, burlesque, vaudeville, and revue, where concert party formed a conduit between them. Moreover, while it may have been an invaluable training ground for the furtherance of variety careers, it was also a highly-specialised art form in its own right (*Illustrated London News*, 3 Aug. 1935: 218). But, as remarked by Heslop, it had become “a rather despised form of entertainment with some people” (*Stage*, 26 Jun. 1958: 8), a prejudice also revealed in the famous sociological study of Seebohm Rowntree and G. R. Lavers (261).

Mander and Mitchenson, in their book on *Revue*, stated that “*The Follies* had several imitators even in London itself, though nothing again really succeeded in this vein until *The Co-optimists* appeared in 1921” (23). Their assertion reflects a long-held, and frequently-articulated generalisation and oversimplification which has contributed to a distortion in the historiography of the genre. It is a view which also alludes to a hierarchy of entertainment whereby the West End theatre is seen as more worthy than its provincial, alfresco or busking cousins. Furthermore, the assumption that concert party may be characterised solely in terms of the *Follies* and *Co-Optimists*, is also erroneous. In the light of fresh scholarship, both views deserve to be vigorously challenged. More broadly, concert party also begs an assessment of its significance in the popular culture of early twentieth-century Britain, and

further, of how it sits within a longer-term view of the development of Variety in the wider sense of the term. While such topics obviously require more scholarly investigation, Louis Rihll's scenario is strongly suggestive of a significant input from concert party which, by nurturing a pool of talent and expertise, permeated and influenced the development of other entertainment forms.

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² Attention is drawn to those of G. L. Mellor, Mave and Ben Chapman, Bill Ellis, and Bill Pertwee.

³ This estimate is derived from the ‘Concert Party Register’ which was first published in the February 1913 edition of the *Stage* newspaper (*Stage*, 20 Feb. 1913: 21). Twenty such lists were published in the newspaper (giving the name, proprietor(s), and the date and place of first appearance of each concert party), the last being in 1922 as far as can be ascertained (*Stage*, 28 Dec. 1922: 28). The total number of registered concert parties from the published lists is 788. This however grossly underestimates the true number. Thus, not only did many parties not register their name, some (perhaps many) updated lists were not actually published in the newspaper but were simply made available by post to bone fide proprietors for a small fee. It has been confirmed that these lists no longer exist. Clarkson Rose refers to the April 1920 issue of the *Stage* having “38 pages of closely-printed show titles” (64). This statement however is misleading as the list was never published in any of the five issues of the *Stage* for April 1920 so the reference must be to an unpublished list made available to proprietors. Registration of concert party ‘titles’ continued after the second world war (*Stage*, 17 Jul. 1947: 4).

⁴ Louis Rihll came from a talented family. Of his seven siblings, his three sisters were artistically inclined. Maud Rihll (1871-1946) was a Thalberg Scholar of the Royal College of Music, and a well-know concert pianist in the late nineteenth century. Edith Rihll (1877-1965) was also a pianist who in 1910 married the musician and composer Frank Alford Armstrong FRCO (1873-1955) who collaborated with Louis Rihll on many occasions. Jessie Rihll (1882-1956) was the actress and star of silent film known as Joan Ritz, and the second wife of the early English film producer, Percy Nash (1868-1958) whom she married in 1912. Joy (Joyceline Edith) Rihll (1911-1996), a niece of Louis Rihll, was a vocalist and dancer in Jerome’s Kern’s American musical comedy *Sally* in the 1930s, playing also in pantomime and other musical comedies. As an ENSA artiste she was known as Joy Lynn, and in 1935 married the comedian Wilfred (William John) Watson (1896-1961). (Note that the name ‘Rihll’ is often misspelled, the variants ‘Rihill’ or ‘Rhll’ being sometimes found.)

⁵ Harry Wolseley Charles married the comedienne Dora Dolaro (1890-1972), née Dora Phoebe Solomon, in 1915. After their divorce in 1919 he subsequently married the RADA-trained mezzo-soprano Jessie Barbara Russell (1899-1986) in 1921 who was formerly of the *Scamps* concert party. From his second marriage Charles had a son Dennis Wolseley-Charles (1924-95) and a daughter Rosemary Hicks-Beach whose godfather was Stanley Holloway. (My thanks to both Roz Wolseley-Charles and Rosemary Hicks-Beach for recollections of their relative.) Charles, who composed many of the songs that made Holloway famous, was cremated at Golders Green on 3 December 1962 (*Stage*, 6 Dec. 1962: 17). No obituary has been found.

⁶ Charles McIvor Goyder Heslop married the actress Maud (‘Maidie’) Field (1885-1966) in 1908. Heslop was called up for army service in June 1916 and disbanded his *Brownies* concert party until after the War.

⁷ In Chapter 4 of Gardner's *Pure Folly* is an account of "Pélissier's Playmates" in which he includes short biographical details of the four male and four female members of the *Follies* (62-100). Louis Rihll is not listed as one.

⁸ A playbill for the January 1909 performance of *Dot* may be found in the Belknap Collection for the Performing Arts, George A. Smathers Libraries Department of Special and Areas Studies Collection, University of Florida, Gainesville. The cast included Mrs J. T. Grein (wife of the impresario, dramatic critic, and founder of the Independent Theatre Society in London) as Dot, and the author W. T. Shore as John Peerybingle.

⁹ Permission to publish this photo was kindly granted by Mr Joe Henson MBE. The photo comes from the album of the late Edith Armstrong née Rihll (a sister of Louis Rihll) in the possession of her great niece Paula Gear née Rihll.

¹⁰ *The Glad Eye*, with Rihll's *Tatlers*, also performed for the week beginning 26 August 1912 at the Brixton Theatre (*Stage*, 29 Aug. 1912: 21), a fact not recorded in Wearing.

¹¹ This comparison is based on a small selection of playbills of the *Follies* at the Apollo Theatre, London, in 1910, sourced in Pélissier's personal file in the Mander and Mitchenson theatre collection at the University of Bristol.

¹² For these productions the *Tatlers* were variously billed the *Apollo Tatlers*, *Strand Tatlers* or the *Vaudeville Tatlers* depending on venue. *The Glad Eye* was revived in October 1914 but without the *Tatlers*.

¹³ The Lord Chamberlain's Play (Manuscripts) Collection, British Library, London.

¹⁴ In the meanwhile Louis Rihll had found time to produce four performances of André Messager's opera *Veronique* for Lloyd's Operatic and Dramatic Society at the Court (London) between 16 and 19 April 1913 (*Stage*, 24 Apr. 1913: 24; Parsons 28).

¹⁵ A playbill, which includes a picture of the *Nicely, Thanks!* touring party dressed in Pierrot attire which performed at the Leeds Hippodrome on 9 March 1914, may be found in the Leeds Library and Information Service collection at <http://www.leodis.net/playbills>.

¹⁶ In view of the recent death of the much-loved actor Clive Dunn OBE (1920-2012) of "Dad's Army" fame, it is worthy of note that his mother, the comedienne Connie Clive (1889-1986), née Constance Ethel Franklin, was a short-lived member of the *Tatlers* at this time.

¹⁷ Sourced at the V & A Theatre and Performance Archives, Blythe House, London in the Production File for the Comedy Theatre, 1912-13.

¹⁸ Evidence for Stanley Holloway's friendship with the Rihll family comes from Paula Gear, a great niece of Louis Rihll. She recounted to the author the day when Holloway was present in the house of her grandfather, Sydney Rihll (1880-1950), when his son John Louis Rihll (1922-96), her father, was born.

¹⁹ In this film, a copy of which exists in the National Television and Film Archive collection (item number 3852), Charles Heslop plays Fred Beenstock, Louis Rihll plays Jim Heeler, and Nash's wife (Rihll's sister) Joan Ritz plays Maggie Hobson (Gifford, entry 06877).

²⁰ It was coincidentally in this year that Rihll was elected to the Theatrical Managers' Association for touring managers (*Stage*, 27 Apr. 1922: 16).

²¹ A scene from *No, No, Nanette* performed at the Gloucester Hippodrome showing Louis Rihll in the role of Jimmy Smith may be found in the *Gloucester Citizen* for 24 August 1929 on page 11. The photo is of too poor quality for reproduction here but Rihll is seated and surrounded by other unidentified actors.

²² See Henson's comments in *My Laugh Story* on "Repertoire, Repertoire, always Repertoire" (1926: 104). In concert party, repetition of old material ('gags') was quickly spotted, as happened once to the *Tatlers* on a return visit to Clacton-on-Sea (*Stage*, 5 Jun. 1919: 3).

²³ Articles reminiscing about the lost art form of the seaside Pierrot show abounded in the 1940s and 1950s. See for example the *Stage*, 10 Feb. 1944: 4; 24 Aug. 1944: 4; 4 Dec. 1947: 6; 14 Jul. 1949: 15; 15 Jul. 1954: 7; 17 Oct. 1957: 14; 14 Nov. 1957: 14; 6 Feb. 1958: 16, and 19 Mar. 1959: 10.

²⁴ Rihll's death (from pneumonia, like his father) occurred on the same day as the very last performance of *Oh, Daddy!* at the Prince's Theatre before its transfer to Daly's. A bachelor, he died in the house of his brother Sydney Rihll in South Woodford, Essex, and is buried at the Chingford Mount Cemetery in the same grave space (Grave Number 44680, Section B7) as his parents Louis William Rihll (1845-98) and Emily née Bower (1850-1924). On a well-preserved headstone, Louis Rihll's fitting epitaph reads 'Loved by all'. At his funeral the following Tuesday were Leslie Henson and Guy Fane, among others who had worked for him (*Daily Express*, 7 Feb. 1931:15).