

= George Robey =

Sir George Edward Wade , CBE (20 September 1869 ? 29 November 1954) , known professionally as George Robey , was an English comedian , singer and actor in musical theatre , who became known as one of the greatest music hall performers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries . As a comedian , Robey mixed everyday situations and observations with comic absurdity . Apart from his music hall acts , he was a popular Christmas pantomime performer in the English provinces , where he excelled in the dame roles . He scored notable successes in musical revues during and after the First World War , particularly with the song " If You Were the Only Girl (In the World) " , which he performed with Violet Loraine in the revue *The Bing Boys Are Here* (1916) . One of his best @-@ known original characters in his six @-@ decade long career was the Prime Minister of Mirth .

Born in London , Robey came from a middle @-@ class family . After schooling in England and Germany , and a series of office jobs , he made his debut on the London stage , at the age of 21 , as the straight man to a comic hypnotist . He soon developed his own act and appeared at the Oxford Music Hall in 1890 , where he earned favourable notices singing " The Simple Pimple " and " He 'll Get It Where He 's Gone to Now " . In 1892 , Robey appeared in his first pantomime , *Whittington Up @-@ to @-@ date* in Brighton , which brought him to a wider audience . More provincial engagements followed in Manchester , Birmingham and Liverpool , and he soon became a mainstay of the popular Christmas pantomime scene .

Robey 's music hall act matured in the first decade of the 1900s , and he undertook a number of foreign tours . He starred in the Royal Command Performance in 1912 and regularly entertained before aristocracy . He was an avid sportsman , playing cricket and football at a semi @-@ professional level . During the First World War , he achieved great success in *The Bing Boys Are Here* (1916) and several other revues . He raised money for many war charities and was appointed a CBE in 1919 . From 1918 , he created sketches based on his Prime Minister of Mirth character and used a costume he had designed in the 1890s as a basis for the character 's attire . He made a successful transition from music hall to variety shows and starred in the revue *Round in Fifty* in 1922 , which earned him still wider notice . With the exception of his performances in revue and pantomime , he appeared as his Prime Minister of Mirth character in all the other entertainment media including variety , music hall and radio .

In 1913 he debuted in film , but he only had modest success in the medium . He continued to perform in variety theatre in the inter @-@ war years and , in 1932 , starred in *Helen !* , his first straight theatre role . His appearance brought him to the attention of many influential directors , including Sydney Carroll , who signed him to appear on stage as Falstaff in *Henry IV , Part 1* in 1935 , a role that he later repeated in Laurence Olivier 's 1944 film , *Henry V* . During the Second World War , Robey raised money for charities and promoted recruitment into the forces . By the 1950s , his health had deteriorated , and he entered into semi @-@ retirement . He was knighted a few months before his death in 1954 .

= = Biography = =

= = = Early life = = =

Robey was born at 334 Kennington Road , Kennington , London . His father , Charles Wade , was a civil engineer who spent much of his career on tramline design and construction . Robey 's mother , Elizabeth Mary Wade née Keene , was a housewife ; he also had two sisters . His paternal ancestors originated from Hampshire ; his uncle , George Wade , married into aristocracy in 1848 , a link which provided a proud topic of conversation for future generations of the Wade family . When Robey was five , his father moved the family to Birkenhead , where he helped in the construction of the Mersey Railway . Robey began his schooling in nearby Hoylake at a dame school . Three years later the family moved back to London , near the border between Camberwell and Peckham . At

around this time , trams were being introduced to the area , providing Charles Wade with a regular , well @-@ paid job .

To fulfil an offer of work , Charles Wade moved the family to Germany in 1880 , and Robey attended a school in Dresden . He devoted his leisure hours to visiting the city 's museums , art galleries and opera houses and gained a reasonable fluency in German by the time he was 12 . He enjoyed life in the country and was impressed with the many operatic productions held in the city and with the Germans ' high regard for the arts . When he was 14 , his father allowed him to move in with a clergyman 's family in the German countryside , which he used as a base while studying science at Leipzig University . To earn money , he taught English to his landlord 's children and minded them while their parents were at work . Having successfully enrolled at the university , he studied art and music and stayed with the family for a further 18 months so he could complete his studies before returning to England in 1885 . He later claimed , apparently untruthfully , to have studied at the University of Cambridge .

At the age of 18 Robey travelled to Birmingham , where he worked in a civil engineer 's office . It was here that he became interested in a career on the stage and often dreamed of starring in his own circus . He learned to play the mandolin and became a skilled performer on the instrument . This drew interest from a group of local musicians and , together with a friend from the group who played the guitar , Robey travelled the local area in search of engagements . Soon afterwards , they were hired to play at a charity concert at the local church , St Mary and St Ambrose in Edgbaston , a performance that led to more local bookings . For the next appearance , Robey performed an impromptu version of " Killaloo " , a comic ditty taken from the burlesque Miss Esmeralda . The positive response from the audience encouraged him to give up playing the mandolin to concentrate instead on singing comic songs .

= = = = London debut = = = =

By 1890 Robey had become homesick , and so he returned to South London , where he took employment in a civil engineering company . He also joined a local branch of the Thirteen Club , whose members , many of whom were amateur musicians , performed in small venues across London . Hearing of his talent , the founder of the club , W. H. Branch , invited Robey to appear at Anderton 's Hotel in Fleet Street , where he performed the popular new comic song " Where Did You Get That Hat ? " . Robey 's performance secured him a number of private engagements for which he was paid a guinea a night . By the early months of 1891 , Robey was much in demand , and he decided to change his stage name . He swapped " Wade " for " Robey " after working for a company in Birmingham that bore the latter name . It was at around this time that he met E. W. Rogers , an established music hall composer who wrote songs for Marie Lloyd and Jenny Hill . For Robey , Rogers wrote three songs : " My Hat 's a Brown ' Un " , " The Simple Pimple " and " It Suddenly Dawned Upon Me " .

In 1891 Robey visited the Royal Aquarium in Westminster where he watched " Professor Kennedy " , a burlesque mesmerist from America . After the performance , Robey visited Kennedy in his dressing room and offered himself as the stooge for his next appearance . They agreed that Robey , as his young apprentice , would be " mesmerised " into singing a comic song . At a later rehearsal , Robey negotiated a deal to sing one of the comic songs that had been written for him by Rogers . Robey 's turn was a great success , and as a result he secured a permanent theatrical residency at the venue . Later that year , he appeared as a solo act at the Oxford Music Hall , where he performed " The Simple Pimple " and " He 'll Get It Where He 's Gone to Now " . The theatrical press soon became aware of his act , and The Stage called him a " comedian with a pretty sense of humour [who] delivers his songs with considerable point and meets with all success " . In early 1892 , together with his performances at the Royal Aquarium and the Oxford Music Hall , Robey starred alongside Jenny Hill , Bessie Bonehill and Harriet Vernon at the Paragon Theatre of Varieties in Mile End , where , according to his biographer Peter Cotes , he " stole the notices from experienced troupers " .

That summer , Robey conducted a music hall tour of the English provinces which began in

Chatham and took him to Liverpool , at a venue owned by the mother of the influential London impresario Oswald Stoll . Through this engagement Robey met Stoll , and the two became lifelong friends . In early December , Robey appeared in five music halls a night , including Gatti 's Under the Arches , the Tivoli Music Hall and the London Pavilion . In mid @-@ December , he travelled to Brighton , where he appeared in his first Christmas pantomime , Whittington Up @-@ to @-@ Date . Pantomime would become a lucrative and regular source of employment for the comedian . Cotes calls Robey 's festive performances the " cornerstone of his comic art " , and the source of " some of his greatest successes " .

= = = = Music hall characterisations = = = =

During the 1890s Robey created a number of music hall characters centred on everyday life . Among them were " The Chinese Laundryman " and " Clarence , the Last of the Dandies " . As Clarence , Robey dressed in a top hat and frock coat and carried a malacca cane , the garb of a stereotypical Victorian gentleman . For his drag pieces , the comedian established " The Lady Dresser " , a female tailor who was desperate to out @-@ dress her high class customers , and " Daisy Dillwater , the District Nurse " who arrived on stage with a bicycle to share light @-@ hearted scandal and gossip with the audience before hurriedly cycling off .

With Robey 's popularity came an eagerness to differentiate himself from his music hall rivals , and so he devised a signature costume when appearing as himself : an oversized black coat fastened from the neck down with large , wooden buttons ; black , unkempt , baggy trousers and a partially bald wig with black , whispery strands of unbrushed , dirty @-@ looking hair that poked below a large , dishevelled top @-@ hat . He applied thick white face paint and exaggerated the redness on his cheeks and nose with bright red make @-@ up ; his eye line and eyebrows were also enhanced with thick , black greasepaint . He held a short , misshaped , wooden walking stick , which was curved at the top . Robey later used the costume for his character , The Prime Minister of Mirth . The outfit helped Robey become instantly recognisable on the London music hall circuit . He next made a start at building his repertoire and bought the rights to comic songs and monologues by several well @-@ established music hall writers , including Sax Rohmer and Bennett Scott . For his routines , Robey developed a characteristic delivery described by Cotes as " a kind of machine @-@ gun staccato rattle through each polysyllabic line , ending abruptly , and holding the pause while he fixed his audience with his basilisk stare . "

= = = = Success in pantomime and the provinces = = = =

At the start of 1894 , Robey travelled to Manchester to participate in the pantomime Jack and Jill , where he was paid £ 25 a week for a three @-@ month contract . He did not appear in Jack and Jill until the third act but pleased the holiday crowds nonetheless . During one performance the scenery mechanism failed , which forced him to improvise for the first time . Robey fabricated a story that he had just dined with the Lord Mayor before detailing exactly what he had eaten . The routine was such a hit that it was incorporated into the show as part of the script .

In the final months of 1894 , Robey returned to London to honour a contract for Augustus Harris at the Theatre Royal , Drury Lane , the details of which are unknown . In September he starred in a series of stand @-@ up comedy shows that he would perform every September between 1894 and 1899 . These short performances , in English seaside resorts including Scarborough and Bournemouth , were designed chiefly to enhance his name among provincial audiences . For the 1895 and 1896 Christmas pantomimes , he appeared in Manchester and Birmingham , respectively , in the title role of Dick Whittington , for which he received favourable reviews and praise from audiences . Despite the show 's success , Robey and his co @-@ stars disliked the experience . The actress Ada Reeve felt that the production had a bad back @-@ stage atmosphere and was thankful when the season ended , while the comedian Barry Lupino was dismayed at having his role , Muffins , considerably reduced .

On 29 April 1898 , Robey married his first wife , the Australian @-@ born musical theatre actress

Ethel Hayden , at St Clement Danes church in the Strand , London . The congregation was made up of various theatrical colleagues ; J. Pitt Hardacre was his best man , and composer Leslie Stuart was the organist . Robey and Ethel resided briefly in Circus Road , St John 's Wood , until the birth of their first child Edward in 1900 . They then moved to 83 Finchley Road in Swiss Cottage , Hampstead . Family life suited Robey ; his son Edward recalled many happy experiences with his father , including the evenings when he would accompany him to the half @-@ dozen music halls at which he would be appearing each night .

By the start of the new century , Robey was a big name in pantomime , and he was able to choose his roles . Pantomime enjoyed wide popularity until the 1890s , but by the time Robey had reached his peak , interest in it was on the wane . A type of character he particularly enjoyed taking on was the pantomime dame , which historically was played by comedians from the music hall . Robey was inspired by the older comedians Herbert Campbell and Dan Leno , and , although post @-@ dating them , he rivalled their eccentricity and popularity , earning the festive entertainment a new audience . In his 1972 biography of Robey , Neville Cardus thought that the comedian was " at his fullest as a pantomime Dame " .

In 1902 Robey created the character " The Prehistoric Man " . He dressed as a caveman and spoke of modern political issues , often complaining about the government " slapping another pound of rock on his taxes " . The character was received favourably by audiences , who found it easy to relate to his topical observations . That year he released " The Prehistoric Man " and " Not That I Wish to Say Anything " on shellac discs using the early acoustic recording process .

Robey signed a six @-@ year contract in June 1904 to appear annually at , among other venues , the Oxford Music Hall in London , for a fee of £ 120 a week . The contract also required him to perform during the spring and autumn seasons between 1910 and 1912 . Robey disputed this part of the contract and stated that he agreed to this only as a personal favour to the music hall manager George Adney Payne and that it should have become void on Payne 's death in 1907 . The management of the Oxford counter @-@ claimed and forbade Robey from appearing in any other music hall during this period . The matter went to court , where the judge found in Robey 's favour .

Robey was engaged to play the title role in the 1905 pantomime Queen of Hearts . The show was considered risqué by the theatrical press . In one scene Robey accidentally sat on his crown before bellowing " Assistance ! Methinks I have sat upon a hedgehog " ; in another sketch , the comedian mused , " Then there 's Mrs Simkins , the swank ! Many 's the squeeze she 's had of my blue bag on washing day . " Robey scored a further hit with the show the following year , in Birmingham , which Cotes describes as " the most famous of all famous Birmingham Theatre Royal pantomimes " . Robey incorporated " The Dresser " , a music hall sketch taken from his own repertoire , into the show . Over the next few years he continued to tour the music hall circuit both in London and the English provinces and recorded two songs , " What Are You Looking at Me For ? " and " The Mayor of Mudcumdyke " , which were later released by the Gramophone and Typewriter Company .

= = = Career peak years = = =

= = = Sporting interests and violin @-@ making = = =

Off @-@ stage , Robey led an active lifestyle and was a keen amateur sportsman . He was proud of his healthy physique and maintained it by performing frequent exercise and following a careful diet . By the time he was in his mid @-@ thirties , he had played as an amateur against Millwall , Chelsea and Fulham football clubs . He organised and played in many charity football matches throughout England , which were described by the sporting press as being of a very high standard , and he remained an active football player well into his fifties . Robey became associated with cricket by 1895 when he led a team of amateur players for a match at Turney Road in Dulwich . In September 1904 , while appearing in Hull , he was asked by the cricketer Harry Wrathall to take part in a charity cricket match at the Yorkshire County Cricket Club . Robey played so well that Wrathall asked him to return the following Saturday to take part in a professional game . That weekend ,

while waiting in the pavilion before the game , Robey was approached by an agent for Hull City A.F.C. , who asked the comedian to play in a match that same afternoon . Robey agreed , swapped his cricket flannels for a football kit and played with the team against Nottingham Forest as an inside right .

By 1903 Robey was playing at a semi @-@ professional level . He was signed as an inside forward by Millwall Football Club and scored many goals for them . He also displayed a good level of ability in vigoro , an Australian sport derived from both cricket and baseball which was short @-@ lived in England . Two years later he became a member of the Marylebone Cricket Club and played in minor games for them for many years . He gained a reputation at the club for his comic antics on the field , such as raising his eyebrows at the approaching bowler in an attempt to distract him . The writer Neville Cardus was complimentary about Robey 's cricket prowess and called him " an elegant player " whose performances on the cricket field were as entertaining as they were on the stage . Although a versatile player , Robey thought of himself as a " medium @-@ paced , right @-@ handed bowler " .

Robey was asked to help organise a charity football match in 1907 by friends of the Scottish football trainer James Miller , who had died the previous year . Robey compiled a team of amateur footballers from the theatrical profession and met Miller 's former team Chelsea Football Club at their home ground . The match raised considerable proceeds for Miller 's widow . Robey was proud of the match and joked : " I just wanted to make sure that Chelsea stay in the first division . "

In his spare time , Robey made violins , a hobby that he first took up during his years in Dresden . He became a skilled craftsman of the instrument , although he never intended for them to be played in public . Speaking in the 1960s , the violinist and composer Yehudi Menuhin , who played one of Robey 's violins for a public performance during that decade , called the comedian 's finished instrument " very professional " . He was intrigued by the idea that a man as famous as Robey could produce such a " beautifully finished " instrument , unbeknown to the public . Robey was also an artist , and some of his pen and ink self @-@ caricatures are kept at the National Portrait Gallery , London .

== == Oswald Stoll == ==

Robey 's first high @-@ profile invitation came in the first decade of the 1900s from Hugh Lowther , 5th Earl of Lonsdale , who hired him as entertainment for a party he was hosting at Carlton House Terrace in Westminster . Soon afterwards , the comedian appeared for the first time before royalty when King Edward VII had Robey hired for several private functions . Robey performed a series of songs and monologues and introduced the " Mayor of Mudcumdyke " , all of which was met with much praise and admiration from the royal watchers . He was later hired by Edward 's son , the Prince of Wales (the future King George V) , who arranged a performance at Carlton House Terrace for his friend Lord Curzon .

In July 1912 , at the invitation of the impresario Oswald Stoll , Robey took part for the first time in the Royal Command Performance , to which Cotes attributes " one of the prime factors in his continuing popularity " . King George V and Queen Mary were " delighted " with Robey 's comic sketch , in which he performed the " Mayor of Mudcumdyke " in public for the first time . Robey found the royal show to be a less daunting experience than the numerous private command performances that he gave during his career .

At the outbreak of the First World War , Robey wished to enlist in the army but , now in his 40s , he was too old for active service . Instead , he volunteered for the Special Constabulary and raised money for charity through his performances as a comedian . It was not uncommon for him to finish at the theatre at 1 : 00 am and then to patrol as a special constable until 6 : 00 am , where he would frequently help out during zeppelin raids . He combined his civilian duties with work for a volunteer motor transport unit towards the end of the war , in which he served as a lieutenant . He committed three nights a week to the corps while organising performances during the day to benefit war charities . Robey was a strong supporter of the Merchant Navy and thought that they were often overlooked when it came to charitable donations . He raised £ 22 @,@ 000 at a benefit held at the

London Coliseum , which he donated in the navy 's favour .

= = = Film debut and The Bing Boys Are Here = = =

Robey 's first experience in cinema was in 1913 , with two early sound film shorts : " And Very Nice Too " and " Good Queen Bess " , made in the Kinoplasticon process , where the film was synchronised with phonograph records . The next year , he tried to emulate his music hall colleagues Billy Merson and Charlie Austin , who had set up Homeland Films and found success with the Squibs series of films starring Betty Balfour . Robey met filmmakers from the Burns Film Company , who engaged him in a silent short entitled " George Robey Turns Anarchist " , in which he played a character who fails to blow up the Houses of Parliament . He continued to appear sporadically in film throughout the rest of his career , never achieving more than a modest amount of success .

In 1914 , for the first time in many years , Robey appeared in a Christmas pantomime as a male when he was engaged to play the title role in Sinbad the Sailor ; Fred Emney Sr played the dame role . Although the critics were surprised by the casting , it appealed to audiences , and the scenes featuring Robey and Emney together proved the most memorable . During the war the demand for light entertainment in the English provinces guaranteed Robey frequent bookings and a regular income . His appearances in Manchester , Liverpool , Newcastle and Glasgow were as popular as his annual performances in Birmingham . His wife Ethel accompanied him on these tours and frequently starred alongside him .

By the First World War , music hall entertainment had fallen out of favour with audiences . Theatrical historians blame the music hall 's decline on the increasing salaries of performers and the halls ' inability to present profitably the twenty or thirty acts that the audiences expected to see . Revue appealed to wartime audiences , and Robey decided to capitalise on the medium 's popularity . Stoll offered Robey a lucrative contract in 1916 to appear in the new revue The Bing Boys Are Here at the Alhambra Theatre , London . Dividing his time between three or four music halls a night had become unappealing to the comedian , and he relished the opportunity to appear in a single theatre . He was cast as Lucius Bing opposite Violet Loraine , who played his love interest Emma , and the couple duetted in the show 's signature song " If You Were the Only Girl (In the World) " , which became an international success .

This London engagement was a new experience for Robey , who had only been familiar with provincial pantomimes and week @-@ long , one @-@ man comedy shows . Aside from pantomime , he had never taken part in a long @-@ running production , and he had never had to memorise lines precisely or keep to schedules enforced by strict directors and theatre managers . The Bing Boys Are Here ran for 378 performances and occupied the Alhambra for more than a year . The theatrical press praised Robey as " the first actor of the halls " . He made two films towards the end of the war : The Anti @-@ frivolity League in 1916 and Doing His Bit the following year .

= = = Zig @-@ Zag to Joy Bells = = =

Robey left the cast of The Bing Boys during its run , in January 1917 , to star at the London Hippodrome in Albert de Courville , Dave Stamper and Gene Buck 's lavishly @-@ staged revue Zig @-@ Zag ! . Robey included a sketch based on his music hall character " The Prehistoric Man " , with Daphne Pollard playing the role of " She of the Tireless Tongue " . In another scene , he played a drunken gentleman who accidentally secures a box at the Savoy Theatre instead of an intended hotel room . The audience appeared unresponsive to the character , so he changed it mid @-@ performance to that of a naive Yorkshire man . The change provoked much amusement , and it became one of the most popular scenes of the show . Zig @-@ Zag ran for 648 performances . Stoll again secured Robey for the Alhambra in 1918 for a sequel , The Bing Boys on Broadway . The show , again co @-@ starring Violet Loraine , matched the popularity of its predecessor and beat the original show 's run with a total of 562 performances .

Robey returned to the London Hippodrome in 1919 where he took a leading role in another hit

revue , Joy Bells . Phyllis Bedells took over from Pollard as his stage partner , with Anita Elson and Leon Errol as supporting dancers . Robey played the role of an old @-@ fashioned father who is mystified over the changing traditions after the First World War . He interpolated two music hall sketches : " No , No , No " centred on turning innocent , everyday sayings into suggestive and provocative maxims , and " The Rest Cure " told the story of a pre @-@ op hospital patient who hears worrying stories of malpractice from his well @-@ meaning friends who visit him . In the Italian newspaper La Tribuna , the writer Emilio Cecchi commented : " Robey , just by being Robey , makes us laugh until we weep . We do not want to see either Figaro or Othello ; it is quite enough for Robey to appear in travelling costume and to turn his eyes in crab @-@ like fashion from one side of the auditorium to another . Robey 's aspect in dealing with his audience is paternal and , one might say , apostolic . " Joy Bells ran for 723 performances .

In the early months of 1919 , Robey completed a book of memoirs , My Rest Cure , which was published later that year . During the run of Joy Bells he was awarded the Legion of Honour for raising £ 14 @,@ 000 for the French Red Cross . He declined a knighthood that same year because , according to Cotes , he was worried that the title would distance him from his working @-@ class audiences ; he was appointed a CBE by George V at Buckingham Palace instead . On the morning of the penultimate Joy Bells performance , Robey was invited to Stoll 's London office , where he was offered a role in a new revue at the Alhambra Theatre . On the journey , he met the theatre impresario Sir Alfred Butt , who agreed to pay him £ 100 more , but out of loyalty to Stoll , he declined the offer and resumed his £ 600 a week contract at the Alhambra . On 28 July 1919 , Robey took part in his second Royal Command Performance , at the London Coliseum . He and Loraine sang " If You Were the Only Girl (In the World) " .

= = = Inter @-@ war years = = =

= = = = Films and revues of the early 1920s = = = =

A gap in the Alhambra 's schedule allowed Stoll to showcase Robey in a new short film . " George Robey 's Day Off " (1919) showed the comedian acting out his daily domestic routines to comic effect , but the picture failed at the box office . The British director John Baxter concluded that producers did not know how best to apply Robey 's stage talents to film .

By 1920 variety theatre had become popular in Britain , and Robey had completed the successful transition from music hall to variety star . Pantomime , which relied on its stars to make up much of the script through ad lib , was also beginning to fall out of favour , and his contemporaries were finding it too difficult to create fresh material for every performance ; for Robey , however , the festive entertainment continued to be a lucrative source of employment .

Robey 's first revue of the 1920s was Johnny Jones , which opened on 1 June 1920 at the Alhambra Theatre . The show also featured Ivy St. Helier , Lupino Lane and Eric Blore and carried the advertisement " A Robey salad with musical dressing " . One of the show 's more popular gags was a scene in which Robey picked and ate cherries off St. Helier 's hat , before tossing the stones into the orchestra pit which were then met by loud bangs from the bass drum . A sign of his popularity came in August 1920 when he was depicted in scouting costume for a series of 12 Royal Mail stamps in aid of the Printers Pension Corporation War Orphans and the Prince of Wales Boy Scout Funds .

The revue Robey en Casserole (1921) was next for Robey , during which he led a troupe of dancers in a musical piece called the " Policemen Ballet " . Each dancer was dressed in a mock police uniform on top and a tutu below . The show was the first failure for the comedian under Stoll 's management . That December Robey appeared in his only London pantomime , Jack and the Beanstalk , at the Hippodrome . His biographer , Peter Cotes , remembered the comedian 's interpretation of Dame Trot as " enormously funny : a bucolic caricature of a woman , sturdy and fruity , leathery and forbidding " and thought that Robey 's comic timing was " in a class of its own . " In March 1922 Robey remained at the Hippodrome in the revue Round in Fifty , a modernised

version of Round the World in Eighty Days , which proved to be another hit for the London theatre , and a personal favourite of the comedian .

= = = Marriage breakdown and foreign tours = = =

Stoll brought Robey to cinema audiences a further four times during 1923 . The first two films were written with the intention of showcasing the comedian 's pantomime talents : One Arabian Night was a reworking of Aladdin and co @-@ starred Lionelle Howard and Edward O 'Neill , while Harlequinade visited the roots of pantomime . One of Robey 's more notable roles under Stoll was Sancho Panza in Maurice Elvey 's 1923 film Don Quixote , for which he received a fee of £ 700 a week . The amount of time he spent working away from home led to the breakdown of his marriage , and he separated from Ethel in 1923 . He had a brief affair with one of his leading ladies and walked out of the family home .

Robey made a return to the London Hippodrome in 1924 in the revue Leap Year in which he co @-@ starred with Laddie Cliff , Betty Chester and Vera Pearce . Leap Year was set in South Africa , Australia and Canada , and was written to appeal to the tourists who were visiting London from the Commonwealth countries . Robey was much to their tastes , and his rendition of " My Old Dutch " helped the show achieve another long run of 421 performances . Sky High was next and opened at the London Palladium in March 1925 . The chorus dancer Marie Blanche was his co @-@ star , a partnership that caused the gossip columnists to comment on the performers ' alleged romance two years previously . Despite the rumours Blanche continued as his leading lady for the next four years , and Sky High lasted for 309 performances on the West End stage .

The year 1926 was lacking in variety entertainment , a fact largely attributed to the UK general strike that had occurred in May of that year . The strike was unexpected by Robey , who had signed the previous year to star in a series of variety dates for Moss Empires . The contract was lucrative , made more so by the comedian 's willingness to manage his own bookings . He took the show to the provinces under the title of Bits and Pieces and employed a company of 25 artists as well as engineers and support staff . Despite the economic hardships of Britain in 1926 , large numbers of people turned out to see the show . He returned to Birmingham , a city where he was held in great affection , and where he was sure the audiences would embrace his new show . However , censors demanded that he omit the provocative song " I Stopped , I Looked , I Listened " and that he heavily edit the sketch " The Cheat " . The restrictions failed to dampen the audiences ' enthusiasm , and Bits and Pieces enjoyed rave reviews . It ran until Christmas and earned a six @-@ month extension .

In the spring of 1927 Robey embraced the opportunity to tour abroad , when he and his company took Bits and Pieces to South Africa , where it was received favourably . By the time he had left Cape Town , he had played to over 60 @,@ 000 people and had travelled in excess of 15 @,@ 000 miles . Upon his return to England in October , he took Bits and Pieces to Bradford . In August 1928 , Robey and his company travelled to Canada , where they played to packed audiences for three months . It was there that he produced a new revue , Between Ourselves , in Vancouver , which was staged especially for the country 's armed forces . The Canadians were enthusiastic about Robey ; he was awarded the freedom of the city in London , Ontario , made a chieftain of the Sarcee tribe , and was an honorary guest at a cricket match in Edmonton , Alberta . He described the tour as " one of unbroken happiness . " In the late 1920s Robey also wrote and starred in two Phonofilm sound @-@ on @-@ film productions , Safety First (1928) and Mrs. Mephistopheles (1929) .

In early 1929 Robey returned to South Africa and then Canada for another tour with Bits and Pieces , after which he started another series of variety dates back in England . Among the towns he visited was Woolwich , where he performed to packed audiences over the course of a week . Here he met the theatre managers Frank and Agnes Littler , with the latter briefly becoming his manager . In 1932 Robey appeared in his first sound film , The Temperance Fête , and followed this with Marry Me , which was , according to his biographer A. E. Wilson , one of the most successful musical films of the comedian 's career . The film tells the story of a sound recordist in a gramophone company who romances a colleague when she becomes the family housekeeper .

By the later months of 1932 , Robey had formed a romantic relationship with the Littlers ' daughter Blanche (1897 ? 1981) , who then took over as his manager . The couple grew close during the filming of Don Quixote , a remake of the comedian 's 1923 success as Sancho Panza . Unlike its predecessor , Don Quixote had an ambitious script , big budget and an authentic foreign setting . Robey , however , resented having to grow a beard for the role and disliked the French climate and gruelling 12 @-@ week filming schedule . He refused to act out his character 's death scene in a farcical way and also objected to the lateness of the " dreadfully banal " scripts , which were often written the night before filming .

= = = = Venture into legitimate theatre = = = =

Until 1932 Robey had never played in legitimate theatre , although he read Shakespeare from an early age . That year he took the part of King Menelaus in Helen ! , which was an English @-@ language adaptation by A. P. Herbert of Offenbach 's operetta La belle Hélène . The show 's producer C. B. Cochran , a longstanding admirer of Robey , engaged a prestigious cast for the production , including Evelyn Laye and W. H. Berry , with choreography by Léonide Massine and sets by Oliver Messel . The operetta opened on 30 January 1932 , becoming the Adelphi Theatre 's most successful show of the year . The critic Harold Conway wrote that while Robey had reached the pinnacle of his career as a variety star , which only required him to rely on his " breezy , cheeky personality " , he had reservations about the comedian 's ability to " integrate himself with the other stars ... to learn many pages of dialogue , and to remember countless cues . "

After the run of Helen ! , Robey briefly resumed his commitments to the variety stage before signing a contract to appear at the Savoy Theatre as Bold Ben Blister in the operetta Jolly Roger , which premiered in March 1933 . The production had a run of bad luck , including an actors ' strike which was caused by Robey 's refusal to join the actors ' union Equity . The dispute was settled when he was included as a co @-@ producer of the show , thus excluding him as a full @-@ time actor . Robey made a substantial donation to the union , and the production went ahead . Despite its troubles , the show was a success and received much praise from the press . Harold Conway of the Daily Mail called the piece " one of the outstanding triumphs of personality witnessed in a London theatre " . Later that year , Robey completed his final autobiography , Looking Back on Life . The literary critic Graham Sutton admired Robey for his honest and frank account , and thought that he was " at his best when most personal " .

= = = = Shakespearean roles = = = =

According to Wilson , Robey revered Shakespeare and had an " excellent reading knowledge of the Bard " even though the comedian had never seen a Shakespeare play . As a child , he had committed to memory the " ghost " scene in Hamlet . Writing in 1933 , Cochran expressed the opinion that Robey had been a victim of a largely conservative and " snobbish " attitude from theatre managers , that the comedian was " cut out for Shakespeare " , and that if he had been frequently engaged in playing the Bard 's works , then " Shakespeare would probably have been popular . " In 1934 , the theatre director Sydney Carroll offered Robey the chance to appear as Nick Bottom in A Midsummer Night 's Dream at the Open Air Theatre , Regent 's Park , but he initially declined the offer , citing a hectic schedule , including a conflict with his appearance in that year 's Royal Variety Performance on 8 May . He was also concerned that he would not be taken seriously by legitimate theatre critics and knew that he would not be able to include a comic sketch or to engage in his customary resourceful gagging . In the same year , Robey starred in a film version of the hit musical Chu Chin Chow . The New York Times called him " a lovable and laughable Ali Baba " .

At the start of 1935 Robey accepted his first Shakespearean role , as Falstaff in Henry IV , Part 1 , which surprised the press and worried fans who thought that he might retire the Prime Minister of Mirth . The theatrical press were sceptical of a music hall performer taking on such a distinguished role ; Carroll , the play 's producer , vehemently defended his casting choice . Carroll later admitted taking a gamble on employing Robey but wrote that the comedian " has unlimited courage in

challenging criticism and risking his reputation on a venture of this kind ; he takes both his past and his future in both hands and is faced with the alternative of dashing them into the depths or lifting them to a height hitherto undreamt of . " Carroll further opined that " [Robey] has never failed in anything he has undertaken . He is one of the most intelligent and capable of actors . "

Henry IV , Part I opened on 28 February at Her Majesty 's Theatre , and Robey proved himself to be a capable Shakespearean actor , though his Shakespearean debut was marred initially by an inability to remember his lines . A journalist from The Daily Express thought that Robey seemed uncomfortable , displayed a halting delivery and was " far from word perfect " . Writing in The Observer , the critic Ivor Brown said of Robey 's portrayal : " In no performance within my memory has the actor been more obviously the afflicted servant of his lines and more obviously the omnipotent master of the situation " . Another journalist , writing in the Daily Mirror , thought that Robey " gave 25 percent of Shakespeare and 75 percent of himself " .

In any case , such was Robey 's popularity in the role that the German theatre and film producer Max Reinhardt declared that , should the opportunity arise for a film version , the comedian would be his perfect choice as Falstaff . Cotes described Robey as having " a great vitality and immense command of the [role] . He never faltered , he had to take his audience by the throat and make them attentive at once because he couldn 't play himself in . " Although he was eager to be taken seriously as a legitimate actor , Robey provided a subtle nod in the direction of his comic career by using the wooden cane intended for the Prime Minister of Mirth for the majority of his scenes as Falstaff . The poet John Betjeman responded to the critics ' early scepticism : " Variety artistes are a separate world from the legitimate stage . They are separate too , from ballet , opera , and musical comedy . It is possible for variety artists to appear in all of these . Indeed , no one who saw will ever forget the superb pathos and humour of George Robey 's Falstaff " . Later , in 1935 , Blanche Littler persuaded Robey to accept Carroll 's earlier offer to play Bottom , and the comedian cancelled three weeks ' worth of dates . The press were complimentary of his performance , and he later attributed his success to Littler and her encouragement .

= = = Later career : 1936 ? 50 = = =

= = = Radio and television debut = = =

Robey made his radio debut in 1936 when he was interviewed for The Spice of Life programme for the BBC . He spoke about his private life and his time spent on the music hall circuit , which he described as the " most enjoyable experience " of his life . The usually reserved Robey admitted that privately he was not a sociable person and that he often grew tired of his audiences while performing on stage , but that he got his biggest thrill from making others laugh . He also declared a love for the outdoors and mentioned that , to relax , he would draw " comic scribbles " of himself as the Prime Minister of Mirth , which he would occasionally give to fans . As a result of the interview he received more than a thousand fan letters from listeners . Wilson thought that Robey 's " perfect diction and intimate manner made him an ideal broadcast speaker " . The press commented favourably on his performance , with one reporter from Variety Life writing : " I doubt whether any speaker other than a stage idol could have used , as Robey did , the first person singular almost incessantly for half an hour without causing something akin to resentment The comedian 's talk was brilliantly conceived and written . "

In the later months of 1936 , Robey repeated his radio success with a thirty @-@ minute programme entitled " Music @-@ Hall " , recorded for American audiences , to honour the tenth birthday of the National Broadcasting Corporation . In it , he presented a montage of his characterisations as well as impressions of other famous acts of the day . A second programme , which he recorded the following year , featured the comedian speaking fondly of cricket and of the many well @-@ known players whom he had met on his frequent visits to the Oval and Lord 's cricket grounds over his fifty @-@ year association .

In the summer of 1938 Robey appeared in the film A Girl Must Live , directed by Carol Reed , in

which he played the role of Horace Blount . A report in the Kinematograph Weekly commented that the 69 @-@ year @-@ old comedian was still able to " stand up to the screen by day and variety by night . " A journalist for The Times opined that Robey 's performance as an elderly furrier , the love interest of both Margaret Lockwood and Lilli Palmer , was " a perfect study in bewildered embarrassment " .

Robey made his television debut in August 1938 but was unenthused with the medium and only made rare appearances . The BBC producer Grace Wyndham Goldie was dismayed at how little of his " comic quality " was conveyed on the small screen . Goldie thought that Robey 's comic abilities were not limited to his voice and depended largely on the relation between his facial expressions and his witty words . She felt that he should " be forbidden , by his own angel , if nobody else , to approach the ordinary microphone " . Nonetheless , Goldie remained optimistic about Robey 's future television career . The journalist L. Marsland Gander disagreed and thought that Robey 's methods were " really too slow for television " .

That November , and with his divorce from Ethel finalised , Robey married Blanche Littler , who was more than two decades his junior , at Marylebone Town Hall . At Christmas , he fractured three ribs and bruised his spine when he accidentally fell into the orchestra pit while appearing in the 1938 ? 39 pantomime Robinson Crusoe in Birmingham . He attributed the fall to his face mask which gave him a limited view of the stage . The critic Harold Conway was less forgiving , blaming the accident on the comedian 's " lost self @-@ confidence " and opining that the accident was the start of Robey 's professional decline .

= = = = Second World War = = = =

Aware of demand for his act in Australia , Robey conducted a second tour of the country at the start of 1939 . While he was appearing at the Tivoli Theatre in Sydney , war broke out with Germany . Robey returned to England and concentrated his efforts on entertaining to raise money for the war effort . He signed up with the Entertainments National Service Association (ENSA) for whom he appeared in a wide range of shows and also in his own one @-@ man engagements . He would sometimes turn up unannounced to perform at hospitals , munition factories , airfields , anti @-@ aircraft posts and other venues where there was an audience of just a few people .

During the 1940s , Robey appeared predominantly in troop concerts as himself but caused controversy by jokingly supporting the Nazis and belittling black people during his act . His intentions were to gently poke fun at the " Little Englanders " , but audiences thought that he was sympathising with Nazism . His jocular view that a defeat for Hitler would mean a victory for bolshevism was highlighted in a series of controversial interviews , which caused him much embarrassment when challenged and which he regretted afterwards . His views became known in the press as " Robeyisms " , which drew increasing criticism , but his Prime Minister of Mirth remained popular , and he used the character to divert the negative publicity . Cotes wrote that Robey was not a politician , merely a jingoist , who " lived long enough to feel [that] his little @-@ Englander outlook [was causing him] acute embarrassment , and his army of admirers deep dismay . "

Robey starred in the film Salute John Citizen in 1942 , directed by Maurice Elvey and co @-@ starring Edward Rigby and Stanley Holloway , about the effects that the war had on a normal British family . In a 1944 review of the film , Robey was described as being " convincing in [an] important role " but the film itself had " dull moments in the simple tale " . That Christmas , Robey travelled to Bristol , where he starred in the pantomime Robinson Crusoe . A further four films followed in 1943 , one of which promoted war propaganda while the other two displayed the popular medium of cine @-@ variety . Cine @-@ variety introduced Robey to the Astoria in Finsbury Park , London , a venue which was used to huge audiences and big @-@ name acts and was described as " a super @-@ cinema " .

During the early months of 1944 , Robey returned to the role of Falstaff when he appeared in the film version of Henry V , produced by Eagle @-@ Lion Films . The American film critic Bosley Crowther had mixed opinions of the film . Writing in The New York Times in 1946 , he thought that it showcased " a fine group of British film craftsmen and actors " , who contributed to " a stunningly

brilliant and intriguing screen spectacle " . Despite that , he considered the film 's additional screenplay poor and called Falstaff 's deathbed scene " non @-@ essential and just a bit grotesque . " Late in 1944 , he appeared in Burnley in a show entitled Vive Paree alongside Janice Hart and Frank O 'Brian . In 1945 , Robey starred in two minor film roles , as " Old Sam " in The Trojan Brothers , a short comedy film in which two actors experience various problems as a pantomime horse , and as " Vogel " in the musical romance Waltz Time . He spent 1947 touring England , while the following spring he undertook a provincial tour of Frederick Bowyer 's fairy play The Windmill Man , which he also co @-@ produced with his wife .

= = = Last years = = =

= = = = Decline in health = = = =

In June 1951 , now aged 81 , Robey starred in a midnight gala performance at the London Palladium in aid of the family of Sid Field who had died that year . For the finale , Robey performed " I Stopped , I Looked , I Listened " and " If You Were the Only Girl in the World " ; the rest of the three @-@ hour performance featured celebrities from the radio , television and film mediums . The American comedian Danny Kaye , who was also engaged for the performance , called Robey a " great , great artist " . The same month , Robey returned to Birmingham , where he opened a garden party at St. Mary and St. Ambrose Church , a venue in which he had appeared at the beginning of his career . On 25 September he appeared for the BBC on an edition of the radio series Desert Island Discs for which he chose among others " Mondo ladro " , Falstaff 's rueful complaint about the wicked world in Verdi 's opera Falstaff . For the rest of the year Robey made a number of personal appearances opening fetes and attending charity events .

Robey took part in the Festival of Variety for the BBC in 1951 , which paid tribute to the British music hall . For his performance , he adopted an ad @-@ lib style rather than use a script . His wife sat at the side of the stage , ready to provide support should he need it . According to Wilson , Robey 's turn earned the loudest applause of the evening . The following month Robey undertook a long provincial tour in the variety show Do You Remember ? under the management of Bernard Delfont . After an evening 's performance in Sheffield , he was asked by a local newspaper reporter if he considered retiring . The comedian quipped : " Me retire ? Good gracious , I 'm too old for that . I could not think of starting a new career at my age ! " In December , he opened the Lansbury Lodge home for retired cricketers in Poplar , East London ; he considered the ceremony to be one of the " happiest memories of his life . "

By early 1952 , Robey was becoming noticeably frail , and he lost interest in many of his sporting pastimes . Instead , he stayed at home and drew comic sketches featuring the Prime Minister of Mirth . In May he filmed The Pickwick Papers , in which he played the role of old Tony Weller , a part which he had initially turned down on health grounds . The following year , and in aid of the games fund , he starred as Clown in a short pantomime at the Olympic Variety Show at the Victoria Palace Theatre . Organisers asked for him to appear in the Prime Minister of Mirth costume instead of the usual clown garb , a request the comedian was happy to fulfil .

= = = = Knighthood and death = = = =

In the early months of 1954 , Robey accepted a knighthood which was conferred on him by Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother at Buckingham Palace . During the following weeks , his health declined ; he became confined to a wheelchair and spent the majority of his time at home under the care of his wife . In May he opened a British Red Cross fete in Seaford , East Sussex , and , a month later , made his last public appearance , on television as a panellist in the English version of The Name 's the Same . Wilson called Robey 's performance " pathetic " and thought that he appeared with only " a hint of his old self " . By June he had become housebound and quietly celebrated his 85th birthday surrounded by family ; visiting friends were organised into appointments

by his wife Blanche , but theatrical colleagues were barred in case they caused the comedian too much excitement .

Robey suffered a stroke on 20 November and remained in a semi @-@ coma for just over a week . He died on 29 November 1954 at his home in Saltdean , East Sussex , and was cremated at the Downs Crematorium in Brighton . Blanche continued to live on the Sussex coast until her death at the age of 83 in 1981 .

= = Tributes and legacy = =

News of Robey 's death prompted tributes from the press , who printed illustrations , anecdotes and reminders of his stage performances and charitable activities . " Knighthood notwithstanding , George Robey long ago made himself a place as an entertainer and artist of the people " , declared a reporter from the Daily Worker , while a critic for the Daily Mail wrote : " Personality has become a wildly misused word since his heyday , but George Robey breathed it in every pore . " In Robey 's obituary in The Spectator , Compton Mackenzie called the comedian " one of the last great figures of the late Victorian and Edwardian music @-@ hall . "

In December 1954 , a memorial service for Robey was held at St Paul 's Cathedral . The diverse congregation consisted of royalty , actors , hospital workers , stage personnel , students and taxi drivers , among others . The Bishop of Stepney , Joost de Blank , said : " We have lost a great English music hall artist , one of the greatest this country has known in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries . " Performers gave readings at the service , including the comedian Leslie Henson , who called Robey " that great obstinate bullock of variety " . In his lifetime , Robey helped to earn more than £ 2 @,@ 000 @,@ 000 for charitable causes , with £ 500 @,@ 000 of that figure being raised during the First World War . In recognition of his efforts , the Merchant Seaman 's Convalescent Home in Limpsfield , Surrey , named a ward after him , and managerial staff at the Royal Sussex Hospital later bought a new dialysis machine in his memory . In the 1960s , a public house in Finsbury Park , North London , was named " The George Robey " .

Robey 's comic delivery influenced other comedians , but opinions of his effectiveness as a comic vary . The radio personality Robb Wilton acknowledged learning a lot from him , and although he felt that Robey " was not very funny " , he could time a comic situation perfectly . Similarly , the comedian Charlie Chester admitted that , as a comedian , Robey " still didn 't make me laugh , " although he described him as " a legend " whose Prime Minister of Mirth character used a beautiful make @-@ up design . Robey 's biographer Peter Cotes disagreed with these assessments , praising the comedian 's " droll like humour " and comparing it in greatness to Chaplin 's miming and Grock 's clowning . Cotes wrote : " His Mayor , Professor of Music , Saracen , Dame Trot , Queen of Hearts , District Nurse , Pro 's Landlady , and of course his immortal Prime Minister , were all absurdities : rich , outsize in prim and pride , gloriously disapproving bureaucratic petty officialdom at its worst , best and funniest . "

Violet Loraine called her former co @-@ star " one of the greatest comedians the world has ever known " , while the theatrical producer Basil Dean opined that " George was a great artist , one of the last and [sic] the really big figures of his era . They don 't breed them like that now . " The actor John Gielgud , who remembered meeting Robey at the Alhambra Theatre in 1953 , called the comedian " charming , gracious [and] one of the few really great ones " of the music hall era . Upon his death , Robey 's costume for the Prime Minister of Mirth was donated to the London Museum , where it is on permanent display .