

Disclaimer: This interview was conducted in 1995 and concerns memories of 1930s life; as such there may be opinions expressed or words used that do not meet today's norms and expectations.

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\* Middlesex New Synagogue, 24 July 1995: Valentina Bold interviews Ralph (Raphael) Hart

\* Transcribed by Joan Simpson/ Standardised by Annette Kuhn

\* RH= Ralph Hart, OP: Other person; VB=Valentina Bold

\* Notes: First of two interviews with Raphael Hart; Sound Quality: Poor.

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[Start of Tape One]

[Start of Side A]

**RH:** [talking about Spanish Civil War; tape crackly] And of course, the rise of Hitler [rest inaudible].

**VB: Mhm.**

[tape very crackly]

**RH:** [beginning inaudible] Hardly anybody. [Something about Conservative in our school in South London] where Michael [P?] decided to go to after the war. I never knew him personally. He was ten years younger than I am. But he was very left wing.

**VB: Yeah.**

**RH:** However.

**VB: Right. I wonder if maybe I should come over on that side so I can--**

**RH:** Yes. By all means. I could let people come in.

**VB: Yeah. That's what I was thinking.**

**RH:** People will be coming in. [tape very crackly]

[chairs being moved about]

**VB: Right. I mean the first thing I really did want to ask you about was your early memories of the cinema. So I was interested when you were saying that about--**

**RH:** I started going to the cinema in the silent days. [inaudible]. Come in! Put your hand on the pause button.

**VB: Right.**

[other person says hallo; tape paused]

**RH:** When I was in Brixton used to [inaudible]. And I do have some memories of the silent films. One of my favourite characters from those days was a western character called Hoot Gibson. I just about remember Rin Tin Tin. Vaguely. [inaudible]. Edmund Lowe. Victor McLaglen in *What Price Glory*. Which was [inaudible]. I did in fact see erm, *All Quiet on the Western Front*. There were some films that my mother didn't want to see.

**VB: Mhm.**

**RH:** I used to go to the cinema on my own. The Grand in [place name?] was a fleapit. But at least I could go and see films there. Ninepence. [tape crackly; inaudible]. The first talking film that there ever was [then?], it was called *Nothing But The Truth*. But soon after, they had Al Jolson. Not in erm, *The Jazz Singer* but in *The Singing Fool*, [voices in background] which I remember very well. [conversation inaudible]. [Says something about Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire]. Regrettably she died recently. She was my pin-up.

**VB: Ah.**

**RH:** As she was with a lot of young men in those days. I never thought much of Betty Grable personally. [Says something about Forces; pin-up; inaudible]. My mother wouldn't go and see *King Kong* so I went down and saw it by myself. Seen it about six times since then. [tape quality worsens] I'm just trying to think. Oh yes! I didn't see *Gone with the Wind* [until I was on vacation leave in 1944?]. [says something about lunch and West End cinema]. Sat through it for four hours. Of course, during the war, [we saw all the old American films?]. Oh yes! One of the great films and again my mother [wouldn't] see it was erm [*The Invisible Man*. Disembodied [voice?].

**VB: Mhm.**

**RH:** The one and only film that ever gave me nightmares and for many years, even in my late teens. Now it is a pretty [inaudible] but there were things in it which a child of nine years old should not have been permitted to see. It was one of the early Leslie Howard films. During the war for some reason and this plane he was in was shot down. No one ever knew why. This particular film, was based on a [inaudible] stories I now know. It was called 'Out Of Bounds' [referring to *Outward Bound*]. It gave me nightmares. Not because of the, 'cause of what it, the implications. It's not a monster or anything like that. Just the implications in this particular film. My mother took me to see it at Golders Green. And thereafter it gave me nightmares for many years to come [*Outward Bound*]. Leslie Howard. Beryl Mercer. You get used to it. Get to come to terms with it. As you get older. Erm, well now you ask questions.

**VB: Right well. I mean you've mentioned going to the cinemas in Golders Green. What were the cinemas there in the thirties?**

**RH:** The Lido. The Lido.

**VB: Yeah.**

**RH:** I lived round the corner. And very occasionally the Ionic.

**VB: Mhm.**

**RH:** Which was in Golders Green. Just round the corner. I went to the Ionic for the last time, just before it was demolished in the fifties. The one film my parents [and went with my aunt?] went to see was, the musical films in those days were really [inaudible]. My mother and I used to love musical films.

[someone says hello]

**RH:** Most people remember *The Vagabond King*. We saw John Bowles in *The Desert Song*. John Bowles was my mother's pin-up boy. She loved, we all loved his music. Later, course, Mario Lanza but that's [person talks in background asks VB a question].

**VB: Erm, I work at Glasgow University.**

[conversation going on; inaudible]

**RH:** And eh, [inaudible], the disaster if [inaudible]. In [B?] in France in 19 [inaudible]. So now, what else?

**VB: Well, I mean you mentioned as well, not just the entertainment aspect but the news aspect.**

**RH:** Yes. *Pathe Gazette*.

**VB: Yes.**

**RH:** The *Pathe Gazette* it was called at first. Later the *Movietone News*. We went to the *Pathe Gazette* because we assumed that what we saw would be factual. Even if it was not in the papers. As such. What we saw on the screen, we assumed, the camera did not lie. And they showed the Jarrow Hunger Marches for example. Erm, but I remember, the war in Spain, the bombing of Guernica. The eh, [inaudible]. [Infamous place?]. Later of course, they weren't as good as they were presented. [Shot down?]. Erm, however, the German Luftwaffe was intent to frighten us and I think it frightened a great many, 'cause radar was invented, more destruction. Next question please. Next question.

**VB: Well, 'cause I was interested before I turned the tape on you were saying how erm, your political sympathies were affected by that.**

**RH:** Yes. Oh very much! Oh yeah, well my school's extremely left wing. We only had, I think we had one, one chap used to go to the [Conservative club?]. He was regarded as a freak. We were all from left of centre to Communist. Although I couldn't always agree with the Communist [inaudible]. [inaudible] I never did agree entirely what he said. However, yes, we definitely became left wing.

**VB: Yeah.**

**RH:** No question about that!

**VB: That's interesting.**

**RH:** Anti-war. Frightened by what we saw. Forgotten men. The films, *What Price Glory*, I remember. Uh, I don't know about 'Journey's End'. I don't know if that was ever made into a film. If it was, I don't remember seeing it. But certainly, *All Quiet on the Western Front*. In English of course. Wouldn't have known it was German. Oh *Verdun*. That's one film I saw, I think it's silent. 1929. *Verdun*. World War One. Yes. [possibly referring to *Verdun, visions d'histoire/Verdun: Visions of History*]

**VB: Well, another thing that I was interested by was--**

**RH:** Yes. You're doing the research. I'm doing the nattering.

**VB: Yeah. But you mentioned about eh, particularly liking Ginger Rogers.**

**RH:** Yes.

**VB: Musicals.**

**RH:** Yes! Yes.

**VB: Eh, what is about musicals that--**

**RH:** Don't know. Erm, they were eh, escapist.

**VB:** Yeah.

**RH:** I went with my mother. We went for entertainment. To get away from a poor, well, it wasn't exactly. Not to us, not all that cruel. But well it was escapist entertainment. Light relief from the daily drudgery of politics and everything else. *Top Hat*. *The Gay Divorcee*. *Flying Down to Rio* and the rest of the films. Certainly *Top Hat*. *The Gay Divorcee*. Not quite so good but they were number ones. [sound quality of tape deteriorates] [My mother wouldn't see it?]. She'd say, "Well I don't call that entertainment. If you want to go and see, you go and see it yourself!" On your own.

**VB:** [laughs] **Were there other musical stars that you particularly liked?**

**RH:** Well they were the classics. They were the greats. I mean Doris, there was no, Eleanor Powell and Sonja Henie, skating, so they [weren't really musicals?]. But then you say that Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, oh! Alice Faye. Sorry. Alice Faye and Don Ameche. Oh yes. Oh yes. Apart from that I'm trying to remember. [pause 5 seconds; talks to person in background] Got a question for you.

**OP:** Pardon?

**RH:** Cinemas. Apart from Ginger Rogers and Alice Faye, eh, who else was singing and dancing in the thirties? [Has to repeat question]. Not necessarily danced and sang but sang.

**OP:** What was her name. Eh, [name inaudible].

**RH:** Who?

**OP:** Very tall.

**RH:** Tall girl. Well Cyd Charisse was post-war.

**OP:** Not Cyd Charisse. No it's a tall girl.

[everyone talking at once; inaudible]

**RH:** [to VB] Carry on. Only I really have got a very good memory.

**VB: Yeah. I mean what about the Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy? Did you like them?**

**RH:** [pause 2 seconds] Ah. I'm glad you mentioned that. Sugary. Not in the same way. Yes, I know, but singing duets is a, wasn't fit for a boy. Sugary. I'm glad you mentioned them. Sugary. My mother liked John Bowles but she didn't like Nelson Eddy. Sugary for a boy of fifteen--

**VB: Mhm.**

**RH:** Sixteen. Sugary. However, go on.

**VB: What about the comedians? Did you enjoy--**

**RH:** Hardly [any?]. [pause 4 seconds; person comes up and asks "Are we near Somerfield?"] Jeanette MacDonald. Hardly remember her. Hardly remember her. Sorry, I'm thinking about those who appeal to me. Not eh,

**VB: Yeah.**

**RH:** I mean Ann Shelton was not in the films. She was on the radio. Erm, comedians.

**VB: The sort of Laurel and Hardy.**

**RH:** Well yes. All right. I mean eh, they were fill-ins weren't they? We didn't go specifically to see Laurel and Hardy. I mean I was a serious sort of chap. I wasn't, I wasn't [inaudible]. And my mother was much more serious than I. She wasn't all that struck on slapstick comedy.

**VB: Yeah.**

**RH:** That didn't appeal to her. We liked the sort of more serious. Singing, dancing and films like that. Oh yes, yes. Let me give you an example. Mickey Mouse. D'you know the best film I ever thought, I

saw Mickey Mouse in 1940 in *Fantasia*. And I've seen it again. [inaudible] wasn't all that struck on it, but I thought it was superb.

**VB: Mhm.**

**RH:** The music. The reconstruction [tape becomes fuzzier; inaudible]. The 'Nutcracker Suite' and that. Oh! You remember it all your life. *Fantasia*.

**VB: Yeah.**

**RH:** Definitely. But more for [word missing?] than the music than for the Mickey Mouse.

**VB: Yeah.**

**RH:** Tchaikovsky in the middle of it! Which was a bit off. I didn't think a great deal of [inaudible].

**VB: Mhm.**

**RH:** However, never forget it. The funny hats and things like that. However, carry on.

**VB: Yeah. What about the sort of, the cartoon that sort of springs to mind for me is *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in the thirties. Did you--**

**RH:** Fifteen. sixteen! You're joking! Cartoons! Nursery, Disney nursery rhymes. Do me a favour!

**VB: Yeah.**

**RH:** I was in the fifth and sixth years at school and that was babyish.

**VB: Yeah.**

**RH:** *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. It was all right if you'd children, eight, nine, ten years old, didn't you?



**VB: [laughs]**

**RH:** Ask some of the others. Some of the women. Probably liked eh *Bambi*. Mickey Mouse you had a laugh. But it was a short. It was ten minutes of it. There was nothing in it. Pluto and Donald Duck. They were more, though mind you they were better. When you were in the forces they pulled those out. You could've had a laugh in those days.

**VB: Mhm.**

**RH:** [Beginning inaudible]. Bing Crosby and eh, the American singers. Carry on!

**VB: What about erm, the sort of gangster films?**

**RH:** Well. My mother did not like me to see those. They were not for children. [says something about James Cagney; inaudible]. But even so, she did not like me seeing gangster films. She said they were for older people. She did not care for them herself. [tape quality deteriorates; inaudible] Yes, as I said, it was the musicals and the straightforward serious films rather than, you mentioned, I'm glad you mentioned [inaudible]. [inaudible] a good straightforward murder mystery. Up to a point.

**VB: Mhm.**

**RH:** I mean my mother wouldn't see any. I had to go and see that myself. [laughs] "Oh!" she says, "I don't like horror." A good straightforward murder mystery. Charlie Chan. Yes. But not gangster. Could do with *Scarface* and things like that. But a good straightforward murder. You put your mind to it and you get the solution at the end.

**VB: Mhm.**

**RH:** Yeah. 'Cause you'll ask other people.

**VB: Yeah. What about the sort of Sherlock Holmes films? The Basil Rathbone.**

**RH:** Yes! Erm, well I prefer to read the books.

**VB: Ah!**

**RH:** I read them all. I read the book, you're quite right to mention. [Beginning inaudible; name?] was the Sherlock Holmes par excellence. But they was one of thousands of films you see. As such. Oh yes sorry, political thrillers. Yes. I must mention those. Basil Radford and Naunton Wayne. *The Lady Vanishes*. [Person in background talks; inaudible]

**RH:** The thirties. *The Lady Vanishes*.

**OP:** I don't [think] the thirties. It must've been later than that.

**RH:** No. Because it was during the war. These two gentlemen were supposed to be going through [inaudible] and all they could talk about was [inaudible].

**VB: That's right. Yes.**

**RH:** [laughs] It has to be before the war because they finished [tests?] in 1939. Yes, oh yes, *The Lady Vanishes*. Oh yes, Margaret Lockwood. Yes. Oh yes. Eh, but I'm not sure whether these are late thirties or forties.

**VB: Mhm. Mhm.**

**RH:** Oh yes. That was good acting. Yes.

**VB: Mhm.**

**RH:** Yes but erm, she always preferred English films to American films. Wherever possible. James Mason. Margaret Lockwood. All that. One of the last films I've seen, 1945, was *Way To The Stars*. [tape fuzzy; inaudible]

**VB: When you say that you liked something with a bit of mystery--**

**RH:** Yes. Yes. Yes, indeed.

**VB: What about films like *Lost Horizon*? Erm, as a sort of mystery.**

**RH:** Yes. There's so many films. I did see *Lost Horizon*. Yes. Oh yes. Oh thoroughly enjoyed it. That's very late though, in the thirties.

**VB: Yes.**

**RH:** '38, '39. Yeah.

**VB: '39.**

**RH:** Very late. Oh yes. Oh I'm glad you recalled that. Yes. Thank you for mentioning that. Bring out Halliwell.

**VB: [laughs]**

**RH:** Let's have a look at Halliwell and go through it. Yeah. Oh yes. I saw *Lost Horizon*. Yeah. Oh yes.

**VB: Did you like Ronald Colman?**

**RH:** Ah yes. Well, the last film he in was *Around the World In Eighty Days*. Yeah. He had a full cameo role. [says something about mother; inaudible]

**VB: 'Cause I was wondering when you said she liked English stars.**

**RH:** Oh yes. She loved. Oh Ronald Colman. Oh yes. Now I'm with you. I think my memory's coming. Ronald Colman. Clive Brook. Oh yes. Handsome men. [tape fuzzy] Stewart Granger I mentioned before. Yes. Oh yes. But as I say, boys would like a bit more eh, action. And I liked a mystery.

**VB: Yes.**

**RH:** I had a mind for solving, I've always had that sort of mind.

**VB: Yeah.**

**RH:** Working out things. I liked the mystery. [inaudible]. Often enough I was wrong.

**VB: Mhm.**

**RH:** Next please.

**VB: The other one that I was thinking of when you said that your mother liking English stars--**

**RH:** Yes.

**VB: Was Robert Donat.**

**RH:** Oh ye-es!

**VB: And *The 39 Steps*. [laughs]**

**RH:** Yes! Yes. Oh yes! Oh God! Bring out Halliwell! Robert Donat. Yes. *The Ghost Goes West*.

**VB: Ah!**

**RH:** Yes. Oh yes! Now that was a film, that was a serious film. That was the sort of thing I've been trying to remember. Yes. Oh yes. They were the sort of [inaudible].

**VB: Mhm.**

**RH:** Rather than musicals. Oh yeah, that would get your mind working.

**VB: Yeah.**

**RH:** Thinking about things. *The Ghost Goes West*. Robert Donat. And one or two others. Eh, *The 39 Steps*.

**VB: Ah yes.**

**RH:** But I'm not sure of the dates. Madeleine Carroll.

**VB: Yes. That is about, yeah.**

**RH:** Madeleine Carroll. Yes. Now she was another earlier. When we were in our early teens.  
Madeleine Carroll. *I Was A Spy*.

**VB: Ah.**

**RH:** Oh yeah. We'd been to Belgium in 1934. And we were taken to a village [sound quality of tape deteriorates; inaudible]. Eh, she married a Belgian or something. No, she was a Belgian. And she married this [M?] McKenna.

**VB: Mhm.**

**RH:** And they bought a pub in this village [inaudible]. Eh, after the war where she had been [inaudible]. Oh yes. The [W plan?]. Well war films, so long as they were more concerned with spies rather than bomb, bomb, bombing the whole time. Yes.

**VB: Mhm.**

**RH:** And the things that didn't really erm, bombs everywhere. *What Price Glory* was one aspect. Erm, and the film I mentioned, *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

**VB: Yes.**

**RH:** Was another one. I mentioned that. That was another. 'Course, the end of that was one of the great classic endings. When the man reaches up to [inaudible].

**VB: Mhm.**

**RH:** Yes. Carry on please.

**VB: It's interesting you say that. Because it must've had a lot of meaning. Seeing it at the time.**

**RH:** Some of those films. That famous erm, eh debate in the Oxford Union that [inaudible] in those circumstances were for King and Country. But of course, [inaudible] was the rise of the Nazis. Which we saw on the news and that was more calculated to propaganda films. About [inaudible]. Probably a Russian film. [Says something about propaganda; inaudible]. Oh yes! Russian films. Yes. Whenever possible. Specifically, I did anyway. I went on my own. Some of these films were made a bit earlier and didn't come out to this country. *The Battleship Potemkin*. My mother wouldn't go and see that. I had to go and see it by myself. I saw that. [Tape fuzzy; inaudible]. Russian films rather than German. If there was a Russian film you'd go and see it.

**VB: Yeah.**

**RH:** Although, Greta Garbo. No.

**VB: Ah.**

**RH:** Well, they took the mickey out the Russian films with *Ninotchka*. My mother loved Greta Garbo. Yes. *Queen Christina*. They [made a mess?] of it when they showed it. Got the reels in the wrong place at our cinema. Greta Garbo. Yes my mother. [pause 1 second] I couldn't see, she was too old for me. I couldn't understand some of the films that eh Greta Garbo, oh! *Grand Hotel*. I remember that.

**VB: Was that Claudette Colbert?**

**RH:** Pardon?

**VB: Was Claudette Colbert in *Grand Hotel* as well?**

**RH:** I don't think so.

**VB: No.**

**RH:** I thought Claudette Colbert was much more of a comedienne.

**VB: Ah.**

**RH:** The young Clark Gable. Now *It Happened One Night*. Oh yes. Yes, as I say [inaudible]. A straight comedy, rather than a farce. There's a difference between comedy and farce. I was always told the farce is funny all the way through. A comedy can be tragic until the very end and there's a happy ending. That was again [mother always told me?] the difference between comedy and farce.

**VB: Mhm.**

**RH:** [Beginning inaudible]. Claudette Colbert. *It Happened One Night*. Yes. Oh she was lovely. [Name?] was supposed to resemble Claudette Colbert.

**VB: Ah!**

**RH:** Carry on please. Yes go on.

**VB: I was interested when you're talking about seeing these European films.**

**RH:** Yes.

**VB: Was there a special theatre that you saw these at?**

**RH:** Russian. Russian. No, erm, really, yes. No, they were shown as part of the ordinary films!

**VB: Ah I see.**

**RH:** Mostly. I mean if it was a good film. I mean occasionally my mother and I, on a day out, we'd go to the Curzon, somewhere like that, you know. And I saw some very remarkable films there, after the war. But that's another matter. Erm, some of them were made earlier and reshowed. But eh, most of them were shown as part of the diet, you know, of the ordinary films.

**VB: Ah I see.**

**RH:** Where they couldn't find anything else, they put them in, you see. Occasionally the double bill.

**VB:** Ah I see.

**RH:** You see those days, most of the time they had two films. And sometimes they'd fit in. Once we went to the cinema in Golders Green when I was about eight years old and [says something about programme; inaudible].

**VB:** [laughs]

**RH:** And we had about four.

[Says hallo to someone]

[End of Side A]

[Start of Side B]

[tape very crackly and fuzzy]

**RH:** German, [no?]. Studiously avoided them. And Russian films of course. [inaudible]. Whenever they showed good ones.

**VB:** Mhm.

**RH:** I can't remember. [Says something about propaganda]. It was real propoganda. Alexander [surname?] [probably referring to *Alexander Nevsky*]. Has to be after the war. Because it was meant to be, sort of bolster up morale in Russia [inaudible]. I mean *Seven Samurai* I saw one in [Japanese?] after the war. Erm, and so and so forth. [tape quality deteriorates; inaudible]. But I'm talking about post-war.

**VB:** Yes.



**RH:** During the war, we got anything and everything. I was in the Far East. I wasn't a prisoner but we got the [inaudible]. They brought anything and everything. [It wasn't even from this country and America?]. [inaudible] my letters home. [inaudible]. Well, anyway.

**VB:** Well two things spring to mind. Did you always go on your own or did you go with friends?

**RH:** I very rarely, I went mostly with my mother.

**VB:** Yeah.

**RH:** Week after week, the Regal in [N?]. And I occasionally went on my own. My mother abhorred the place. It was a fleapit. The Grand in Herne Hill which is shops or something. [Tape quality very poor]. [inaudible]. My school we did [eight matric?] it's now called. It's now called 'O' Levels.

**VB:** Mhm.

**RH:** We all knew about the Russo-Japanese war. And everything up to the Balkan Wars of 1912. But we never did a damn thing about the Great War, 1914-18, and it wasn't in the syllabus. But it was masters who told us their experiences and the things they saw. And they were anti-war. [inaudible]. World War One. [says something about trying to avoid another war; inaudible].

**VB:** Yeah.

**RH:** And World War Two came along. Not because we were particularly pro-war. We weren't. We tried to avoid getting called up as long as possible but [inaudible]. In the end I went to the Far East--

**VB:** Mhm.

**RH:** But that was the position that most of the boys were left with.

**VB:** Mhm.

**RH:** Because of what they'd seen. [inaudible]. We didn't know about gulags until after the war. We didn't know about eh, we didn't know about German atrocities. And of course the [inaudible] legion in Spain. Well even that was possibly propaganda.

**VB: Mhm.**

**RH:** Okay?

**VB: Yeah.**

**RH:** I've a pretty good memory for storytelling events and things of that nature. But erm, and we did not care much for reconstruction. I never, reconstruction [inaudible]. *Cleopatra. Cleopatra*, things like that. Cecil B. De Mille.

**VB: Mhm.**

**RH:** We-ell, it was over the top. Too many extras and mostly untruths. [Hardly any facts?]. However, thank you very much.

**VB: Thank you very much.**

[End of Interview]