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Ghosting, Hauntology, and “Dinner for One”

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The dead – especially those we care about and miss – are still living among us, somehow: “we act as if the dead are somewhere even if we claim to believe that they are nowhere; we speak as if they remain or return individually to the world of the living even when many of our rituals, practices, and professed beliefs suggest the opposite” (Laqueur 80-81). We mourn the dead, we remember them, and – as in this volume – we commemorate them by way of texts. A much better option would be to bring the dead back to an evening of conviviality and Houswitschkean laughter. Ghosts are an approximation of this wish and a classic way of dealing with the paradoxes of death. They bridge the gap between the actually present material remains of a dead person and the imagined community of the dead – souls, spirits, or inhabitants of an afterlife – and point towards the “permeability of the world of the living and that of the dead” (72).

Ghosts purvey intimations of that “undiscovered country, from whose bourn / No traveller returns” (Shakespeare 160). Hence, their existence has always been precarious. Even in epistemologies that include a belief in a life after death, undead people exist in an unstable state of “as if” (Laqueur 77). In this oscillation between real and unreal, they also reflect on “texts and textuality as such” (Davis 378; see also Wolfreys 71). In the theatre, the spectral ‘as if’ gains a concrete material dimension as real people pretend to be other people in otherworlds. Physically present ghosts on stage seem to be unmistakeably existent, at least in the world of the play in which there are “more things . . . than are dreamt of in your philosophy” (Shakespeare 108).

The corporeality of actors produces another, metaphorical case of ghosting, which Marvin Carlson connects with the “recycled body and persona of the actor” (53). An actor’s body and the roles they play leave their traces, or rather: ghost their performances. Actors in an ensemble are cast as specific, reiterated types, and especially in the twentieth century, film and television create global stars whose stage personae are shaped by their former roles and their public image (88).

Some roles, however, are associated with one specific actor only. One will find millions of Hamlets, but to be or not to be butler James is not a question. It has to be Freddie Frinton. Although the actor died in 1968, he still haunts German television in repeats of “Dinner for One” every New Year’s Eve, bringing four dead people back to life. At a closer look, the sketch contains more ghostings and eerie resurrections: of posh people, of the music hall and revues, of Blackpool, “the great working-class Mecca” (Sandbrook 132), of black-and-white television. Furthermore, since its premiere in the 1930s, “Dinner for One” has accrued quite

a few myths, and it produces hauntings that go beyond the text and are connected with its author, its transfer to Germany, and its status as cult viewing.

Dinner for Eminent Edwardians: Bringing Back the Dead

"Dinner for One" works with the premise that butler James – for reasons unknown – has to impersonate four dead people during the birthday dinner of his employer Miss Sophie (played by May Warden). Because of the multiple toasts in honour of the nonagenarian, he has to consume vast amounts of alcohol. James's advanced age and his growing state of inebriation lead to slurred speech, lapses in professional conduct, and funny accidents. The evening ends with the butler escorting Miss Sophie up the stairs promising to do his "very best" (17:10-17:12) – whether as James, one, or all four of the special guests, remains open.

The sketch uses a comic standard – a drunken man behaving badly – and applies the "mechanics of farce", "a well-oiled machine where each little cogwheel serves its purpose" (Schwanebeck 158), to accelerate disaster and to play with a set of very peculiar ghosts: Sir Toby always asks for one drop more and toasts his friend with a gravelly "Cheerio, Miss Sophie"; Admiral von Schneider clicks his heels; Mr Pommeroy has mild manners and a tiny voice; Mr Winterbottom likes a bit of swagger and flirts with his "old lovely" (07:15).[1] Over the four courses – soup, fish, chicken, and fruit – and the accompanying beverages – sherry, white wine, champagne, and port – the established idiosyncrasies of the ghost characters get more idiosyncratic. Admiral von Schneider misses the heel and throws the drink up in the air; Mr Pommeroy's voice gets tinier and tinier; Mr Winterbottom's compliments slightly go awry. After his "You look younger than ever, love! Younger than ever", he does a double take at Miss Sophie's face and blurts out laughing (10:30-10:36). After the next course, he declares "the bazaar opened", burps heartily, and tilts Miss Sophie's chair (13:47-14:06). At the end of the evening, he drinks the water from the vase and afterwards promises: "I'll kill that cat" (16:30-16:32).

The succession of courses works like a running gag on the macro-level, framed by the recurring dialogue "The same procedure as last year, Miss Sophie?" "The same procedure as every year, James". This is enhanced by some running gags on the micro-level, most prominently focussed on the tiger-skin rug. From the opening, James stumbles over it. But just as the toasts of the ghost guests combine repetition with variation, the running gag reaps the loudest laughter from the studio audience in the NDR recording when James manages to steer clear of

[1] In the 1930s and 1940s, a Mr Winterbottom was part of the popular radio comedy act "Mr Winterbottom and Mr Murgatroyd", starring Ronald Frankau and Tommy Handley. The names seem to stem from the cosmos of Gilbert & Sullivan operettas.

the dangerous tiger (09:08; 12:31) or when he drunkenly jumps over it (15:50; see also Mayr, *A-Z* 119-20).

"The same procedure" also marks the first level of ghosting. By impersonating Sir Toby, Admiral von Schneider, Mr Pommeroy, and Mr Winterbottom, James brings them back to life. They may all look like an old, gap-toothed butler on the surface, but they have their own very special personalities. By repeating the drinking rituals before each course, the four get blurrier and more anarchic, the "procedure" gets more and more out of hand until the Dionysian-Bakhtinian ending. "The same procedure as every year" implies that this has been going on at least since the death of the last friend, 25 years ago (as Heinz Piper informs us before the sketch begins), and that the contingency of James's behaviour is a central part of the annual birthday celebration. On the performative level, the repetitions and variations serve as a vehicle for Frinton's (and Warden's) perfectly timed and expertly rehearsed antics (Rompa 00:09-0:10). In their interplay, death is suspended and comically transcended. Paradoxically, at the same time, death looms large due to the age of the characters: will James survive the night? Will Miss Sophie live to celebrate her 91st birthday?

A second level of ghosting concerns the world of the play. "Dinner for One" refers back to a time of country-house hospitality and the lush lives of the English aristocracy. When the sketch premiered in 1934, English country-house culture was said to be in decline. In Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), for example, the narrator states that genuine country squires have gone out of fashion and are replaced by "immensely successful manufacturer[s]" (Christie 12). When the sketch is revived after the Second World War, authors like Evelyn Waugh declare country houses a phenomenon of the past. "It seemed then", Waugh writes in the 1959 Preface to *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), "that the ancestral seats which were our chief national artistic achievement were doomed to decay and spoliation like the monasteries in the sixteenth century" (8). Miss Sophie's world belongs to a time of long ago. Sir Toby brings to mind Shakespearean, twelfth-night revelry and the robust charm of the gentry. Admiral von Schneider is a caricature of Prussian military pomposity; at the same time, he evokes the bygone era before the First World War when the Windsors were still the Sachsen-Coburg-Gothas, and Prince Louis of Battenberg was an Admiral of the Fleet. The naval overtones also fit perfectly with the imperial grandeur of tiger-skin rug and Mulligatawny soup.

Music Hall, Revue, and the Spectres of Mass Entertainment

Intriguingly, the country house as British institution has survived and seems to be more alive than ever thanks to the heritage boom. In contrast to *Brideshead Revisited* or series like *Downton Abbey* (2010-2015), "Dinner for One" foregoes nostalgia. Although both Miss Sophie and James might be endearing in their

frailties, they also seem stuck in an absurd loop similar to Vladimir and Estragon's in *Waiting for Godot* (1953) – "Must I, Miss Sophie?" "James. We're waiting for Godot." "Skol." – and the escalating mechanics of farce undermine all attempts to find the "kind of gluttony, for food and wine, for the splendours of the recent past" (Waugh 7) characteristic of heritage novels, films, and television. The sketch mocks the eccentricities of the upper classes. A slight whiff of nostalgia and another layer of ghosting, however, can be connected to its cultural context.

Without meaning to do so, the 1963 studio recording by the NDR preserves a form of entertainment that many people also deemed soon to be extinct. Since the 1920s, cultural critics regularly have declared the death of the music hall (and working-class culture in general). In 1922, T.S. Eliot, for instance, combines a eulogy for Marie Lloyd, one of the great stars of the music hall, with ruminations about rapidly changing times:

> The working man who went to the music-hall and saw Marie Lloyd and joined in the chorus was himself performing part of the act; he was engaged in that collaboration of the audience with the artist which is necessary in all art and most obviously in dramatic art. He will now go to the cinema, where his mind is lulled by continuous senseless music and continuous action too rapid for the brain to act upon, and will receive, without giving, in that same listless apathy with which the middle and upper classes regard any entertainment of the nature of art. He will also have lost some of his interest in life. (qtd. in Raab 14)

After the Second World War, John Osborne goes a bit further. In the prefatory note to his play *The Entertainer* (1957), he links the decline of the music hall directly with the decline of Britain and the British Empire, its values, traditions, and standards: "The music hall is dying, and, with it, a significant part of England. Some of the heart of England has gone; something that once belonged to everyone, for this was truly a folk art" (7). The same year, in his seminal *The Uses of Literacy*, Richard Hoggart likewise reminisces about the days of variety shows, popular songs, pantomimes, and music hall, their "raucous and earthy flavour" (117) and "rococo extravagance" (118). Like Eliot, he correlates this with "authentic" working-class culture of decent, solidary, and down-to-earth people. In this respect, "Dinner for One" can indeed be read as exuberant working-class extravaganza. The basic premise relies on spiralling excess, approximating the life of "Them", the members of the upper class, with plenty of food and drink, "in the style in which posh folk are hazily assumed to pass their every day" (123), albeit with a parodic twist.

Whether explicitly or implicitly, Eliot, Osborne, and Hoggart juxtapose older forms of entertainment with the then "new" media, the cinema, radio, or, in the 1950s, the jukebox and television as part of the manipulative and ideology-laden mass culture (Hennessy 536). But, as Stuart Hall points out, "There is no separate, autonomous, 'authentic' layer of working-class culture to be found" (510),

least of all in popular culture. Emerging in the middle of the nineteenth century, the music hall developed into “a very mixed institution” (Williams, *Revolution* 307): clearly a product of the Industrial Revolution and urban mass entertainment, conservative and patriotic, often to the point of jingoism, but at the same time geared towards a working- and lower-middle class audience, making fun of authorities and their moral values (Schneider 15; Raab 10-14). Music halls distinguished themselves from the (legitimate) theatres by a more relaxed, “free and easy atmosphere” (Andrew Wilson qtd. in Schneider 80). The audience could eat, drink, and smoke, talk back at the performers and sing along (46). Around 1891, there were about 500 music halls in London alone (81). Other industrial cities like Manchester, Birmingham, or Glasgow as well as the popular seaside resorts boasted their own music-hall culture (Raab 4). The beginning of the twentieth century saw the heyday of the music hall and the moment of its greatest profitability. When other forms of mass entertainment emerged in the 1910s and 1920s, instead of dying, the music halls negotiated their position in a constantly changing media culture.

Like country houses, music-hall culture survived due to a process of adaptation and appropriation. Artists and producers collaborated across the different media. “Dinner for One”, its creator Lauri Wylie, and his family serve as case in point. Lauri Wylie’s brother Julian Wylie worked as a theatre agent and was known as “King of Pantomime” (Sivan 204). His other brother, George Berthold, aka G.B. or Bertie, Samuelson was one of the pioneers of British film. Lauri Wylie wrote scripts for film, radio, and variety and adapted popular German operettas for the British stage. The music hall as commercial institution might have been in decline by the 1920s, but its general principle of an evening with song, dance, and comedy remained very much alive, not least because of the new media: “variety made a come-back in the Thirties, especially by means of the radio” (Graves and Hodge 297). Robert Graves and Alan Hodge cite Noël Coward’s *Cavalcade* (1932) as one of the big successes on the London stage, like “Dinner for One”, a text dealing with a bygone era, “which evoked the sentimental charm, the belief in progress, and the patriotism of the Victorian age” (296-97). In 1933, *Cavalcade* was turned into an equally successful Hollywood film. This was not overly exceptional. Quite a few music-hall stars appeared in movies. Samuelson, for instance, collaborated with Vesta Tilley (Sivan 208). Conversely, many stars of early Hollywood like Charlie Chaplin or Stan Laurel started their careers in the music hall. This also holds true to a certain extent for British television. In the 1950s, music-hall and variety artists and their shows became the staples of early television comedy (Williams, *Television* 63). Today, the music hall as institution may have gone for good, but its underlying principles survived in the shape of sketch comedies like *The Fast Show* (1993-97), *Goodness Gracious Me* (1998-2001), or *Little Britain* (2003-6). Moreover, variety is still going strong at seaside resorts.

In this respect, the history of "Dinner for One" seems to be a model case for the development of popular entertainment in the twentieth century. The sketch premiered as part of the revue *En Ville Ce Soir* in March 1934 at the Prince of Wales Theatre in London's West End.[2] This fits in with the revival of variety shows, although – unlike *Cavalcade* – its success was rather limited; it closed after a month (Parsons). "Dinner for One", however, lived on irrespective of its theatrical vehicle. The sketch resurfaced in 1948, in the revue *Four, Five, Six* at the Duke of York's Theatre in London (with Bobby Howes and Binnie Hale as James and Miss Sophie) and on Broadway (Mayr, *A-Z* 13; 29). Frinton regularly played James at Blackpool together with varying stage partners as Miss Sophie. According to the official story by the NDR, Blackpool is also where producer Heinz Dunkhase and television compere Peter Frankenfeld discovered the playlet in 1963 and invited Frinton and Warden to Germany. With the help of German television, Frinton managed to own and haunt "Dinner for One" in several respects.

The Ghost of Freddie Frinton

The NDR recording of "Dinner for One" and, more importantly, the annual repeats bring the then 54-year-old Frinton (and Warden) back to life, at least for 18 minutes. Frinton's personal career follows a similar trajectory as the music halls, from working-class origins to television stardom. He was born Frederick Bittiner Coo in 1909, an illegitimate child who grew up with foster parents and started working at a fish factory in Grimsby at the age of fourteen. After having been fired (supposedly for entertaining his colleagues at work), he joined several performance troupes who toured through pubs. Later, he worked as singer at Cleethorpes, a seaside resort in Lincolnshire. The pay for these performances does not seem to have sufficed to earn a living, because he continued to work as fish packer (Follows). In the 1930s and 1940s, under the stage name Freddie Frinton, he started a mildly successful comedy career, appearing in pantomimes, on the radio, in films, and, last but not least, in "Stars in Battledress", a concert party for entertaining the troops during the Second World War.

Unlike comrades such as Tony Hancock, Spike Milligan, or Frankie Howerd, Frinton did not become a big radio and television star in the course of the 1950s and at one point even contemplated giving up the stage: "After the war there were four or five years with no working coming along when I'd sign on at the labour and do anything", he told James Green for *The Liverpool Echo* in 1966 (qtd. in Lincolnshire Lass). Over time, however, his versatility secured stage engagements the whole year round, making use of all the popular forms of entertainment from

[2] Both Stefan Mayr and the documentary by Paul Anthony Sorensen and Martin Turner claim that the premiere took place in 1948 (02:06; Mayr, *A-Z* 13; 135). Ian Parsons's list of London revues, however, unmistakeably documents the first performance in 1934.

Christmas pantomimes to comedies and variety shows during the holiday season. It also helped that he had a broad repertoire of dramatic types, playing female and male, middle-aged and old characters, "alternating Christmas appearances as the Dame with variety shows in the warmer months – in which he often appeared as a drunk, introducing himself with the catchphrase 'Good evening, ossifer' and brandishing his trademark broken cigarette" (Follows).

The figure of the drunk earned him regular appearances on the *Arthur Haynes Show* on ITV, since 1955 the commercial broadcaster in competition with the BBC. It is only a small leap over the tiger-skin rug from there to James and "Dinner for One". Many aspects of the sketch that fans deem indispensable were invented by Frinton. The tiger-skin rug was a gift by the mayor of Bexhill-on-Sea. Frinton worked it into the sketch after "he accidentally tripped over it" while performing (Sorensen and Turner 06:20-07:07).[3] In exchange with his audiences, the performer developed more and more stage business – running up the stairs, throwing drinks into the air – and found funny quirks for his characters – Sir Toby asking for a drop more and Admiral von Schneider clicking his heels, for instance (Mayr, *A-Z* 14). The artist not only made the sketch his own in and through performance, he also owned it in a legal sense, buying the copyright from Wylie in the course of the 1950s.

Frinton and his British audience profited from the period of post-war affluence and social democratic consensus politics that tried to give especially the members of the working class material security and at least nominal equality through the implementation of the Welfare State. Since 1938, Britons were entitled to a paid holiday and quite a few people went to seaside resorts. Before this, places like Blackpool, Weston-super-Mare, or Skegness had already been popular destinations for day trips by motor coach (Hoggart 120-23). Seaside resorts offered plenty of affordable food, drink, and "amusements" (Kynaston 217), among them variety shows. This is also the reason why Frankenfeld and Dunkhase went to Blackpool for their recce.

During the 1960s, the German television audience only occasionally saw "Dinner for One" and remained underwhelmed by the sketch. In Britain, however, Frinton became a sitcom star. The relatively new genre supplemented (and partly superseded) the traditional sketch- and variety shows. In contrast to variety, sitcom plots revolve around a stable set of characters in a fixed situation. Frinton played

[3] According to Mayr ("Lachen"), this happened in Burgess Hill. Intriguingly, both the documentary by Sorensen and Turner and Mayr quote Len Howe as their main source, a colleague of Frinton's and the son-in-law of May Warden. Bexhill-on-Sea appears the more plausible option because it is yet another seaside resort with entertainment facilities. Burgess Hill does not even seem to have a proper theatre building.

alongside Thora Hird in *Meet the Wife* (BBC, 1963-66),[4] a family sitcom with a simple premise: plumber Fred wants his peace, his upwardly-mobile wife Thora seeks novelty and improvement. Here, Frinton played someone his actual age and original class. He could build his performance on previous collaborations with Hird. The two had regularly worked together at seaside theatres, often playing a mismatched married couple. The BBC took their cue for the sitcom from these popular stage personae – yet another indication of the ongoing cross-media appropriations. Frinton was about to star in another sitcom and to record a version of "Dinner for One" in colour at the behest of the NDR when he died in 1968. He did not live to see his triumph on German television. Today, only specialists on comedy know about him in Britain.

The Ghost of New Year Past

"Dinner for One" gradually became cult viewing thanks to the decision by the then director of light entertainment at the NDR, Henri Regnier, who decided to broadcast the sketch on New Year's Eve in 1972. In the following years, the other regional West German television stations followed suit and so did broadcasters in Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxemburg, and Denmark (Mayr, *A-Z* 137). Today, watching "Dinner for One" is one of the central rituals of New Year's Eve in Germany, and, due to this, the sketch is the broadcast with the most repetitions in the world, which has earned it an entry in the *Guinness Book of Records* (Mayr, *A-Z* 61; 137-41; Rompa 02:20). "Cheerio, Miss Sophie" and "the same procedure as every year" have entered the active vocabulary of many continental Europeans (101-04).

What characterises the efficacy of the sketch – repetition with variations – can also be observed on the meta-level. The sketch is probably not popular because of its verbal brilliance or originality, but because almost everyone can understand its humour and because it is part of a traditional ritual. One watches it because one watches it. The additional "Dinner-for-One" effect results from the long gap between the broadcasts and the ensuing cheerful anticipation and the discovery of new or forgotten funny details with each viewing. Watching the sketch together with a group of people and drinking along with James creates a sense of community. "Dinner for One" thus also triggers memories of other New Year's Eves, convivial moments with friends and family – some of them long gone. The cult value is enhanced by adaptations and appropriations, all of them ghosting Frinton and Warden, in regional dialects, with new guests, with Miss Sophie's four friends alive, recreated with Lego figures, or re-enacted by Bernd das Brot (for an exhaustive list, see Mayr, *A-Z* 142-45). Live performances by professionals and

[4] Even The Beatles paid tribute to the sitcom with a brief reference in "Good Morning, Good Morning" from *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967; Mayr, *A-Z* 24).

amateurs alike are legion. And so are the special events in restaurants or shopping malls.

Although the sketch does not foster nostalgia for the Edwardian squirearchy, by now it has attained nostalgic overtones, indirectly celebrating the times of black-and-white, three-channels-only, family-viewing television. James, Miss Sophie, and especially master of ceremonies Heinz Piper in their evening clothes exude solidity and a slightly stuffy form of light entertainment, in Germany personified by comperes like Frankenfeld or Hans-Joachim Kulenkampff.

Here, the ghostings start to merge with cultural hauntings. Today, the sketch evokes images of a double past – Edwardian times and the black-and-white Sixties (and probably also one's own youth) – connected with a lost future. According to Mark Fisher, this form of haunting oscillates between two poles: "the no longer of actually existing social democracy, but the not yet of the futures that popular modernism trained us to expect, which never materialised" (27). And these are not the only hauntings.

Hauntings of Forgotten Pasts

The official title of the NDR recording – "Freddie Frinton: Der 90. Geburtstag oder Dinner for One" – implies that Frinton himself wrote the sketch. Then and now, not many people seem to care about the real author. Dunkhase deemed it the "Furz irgendeines Autors" (6), and the NDR website "'Dinner for One': Alles zum Silvester-Klassiker" does not mention Lauri Wylie. Although Frinton's performance added many important elements, the basic situation, the comic escalations, and the dialogue were provided by Wylie. With him, the story of "Dinner for One" intriguingly swerves back to Europe.

Wylie's family came from Poland and Prussia. They were Jews who emigrated to Britain at the end of the eighteenth century. Wylie's paternal family (whose members changed their names from Metzenberg to Samuelson) emigrated to Britain from Lissa. Depending on the exact time of emigration, Lissa was either part of Poland or Prussia; today the town is known as Leszno in Poland (Sivan 203). Wylie's mother came from Vandsburg in Prussia, today Więcbork in Poland (Ancestry.com). Both parents were practicing Jews and probably part of an "increasingly middle-class, anglicized, mainly latitudinarian body" (Roth et al. 416) who arrived in Britain before the great wave of immigrants from Eastern Europe at the end of the nineteenth century.

Born in Southport as Maurice Laurence Samuelson in 1880, Lauri and his brother Julian later changed their names to Wylie, an anglicised version of their mother's maiden name Weile. In one way, Lauri's life can be read as an example of the trend towards assimilation (and growing invisibility) of British Jews. He "married

a non-Jewess in 1904" (Sivan 207) to the disappointment and chagrin of his mother. And it is probable that he stopped practicing his religion. In another way, the careers of him and his brothers can be seen as indication of the special position of Jews in British popular culture. Their engagement in variety, pantomime, and cinema can be explained by the low status of these genres, which therefore were more accommodating to members of minorities than the legitimate theatre (Sivan 201). Wylie wrote for the stage, radio, and film, not seldom in collaboration with his brothers. In the 1930s and 1940s, he regularly contributed to the programme of BBC national radio, working with stars like Dan Leno, Lupino Lane, or George Formby, with variety shows like *60 Smiles an Hour* and *Lauri Wylie's Wireless Puppets* or pantomimes (produced by his brother Julian). BBC television broadcast the musical comedy *Sweetheart Mine* (co-written by Wylie and Lane) in 1946. Unfortunately, not much else can be gleaned about his life. He seems to have sold the rights to "Dinner for One" to Frinton at some point and died in 1951 in Shoreham-by-Sea, West Sussex (Ancestry.com).

The story of how "Dinner for One" came to Germany is equally full of erasures and hauntings. The still dominant story provided by the NDR claims Dunkhase and Frankenfeld as the comedy pioneers, who discovered Frinton in Blackpool in 1962 at 11 o'clock in the morning and hired him on the spot. But "the truth is never pure and rarely simple" (Wilde 259). The sketch seems to have been discovered three times. The German theatrical premiere of "Dinner for One" took place in Munich in March 1959. Ernest Egon Regon translated and performed the sketch in German together with his wife and stage partner June Royal under the title "Gedächtnismahl" (Mayr, *A-Z* 114).

Not much is known about the artists. According to journalist and renowned dinnerologist Stefan Mayr, Regon was the son of an "English" father and an Alsatian mother (114). At a certain point, he must have moved to Czechoslovakia, or he invented an Anglo-Alsatian biography after the war to fit his stage persona. An Egon Ernest Regon, born in 1913, is listed in the Holocaust Survivors and Victims Database (giving his birth name as Schönherz).[5] Regon must have fled to Britain in the 1930s[6] and became a British citizen on 24 December 1947 (National Archives). In February 1948, *The London Gazette* lists him as "Regon, Egon Ernest (formerly Egon Schoenherz); Czechoslovakia; Variety Artist, 128, Ralph Court, Queensway, London, W.2.". I could not find out where exactly he performed on stage, but the BBC records regular appearances on radio and television from 1943

[5] Referring to files from the Public Record Office HO294/612 and HO294/613 "regarding registered individuals and associated persons, by the British Committee for Refugees from Czechoslavakia and later, the Czech Refugee Trust Fund Documents".

[6] It seems plausible to assume that Egon Ernest is identical with Eddie Regon listed in the *Handbuch des deutschsprachigen Exiltheaters*. Eddie Regon had performed in revues of the *Freier Deutscher Kulturbund* (Free German League of Culture) since 1939 (Trapp 761).

to the late 1950s (sometimes together with June Royal) in music hall, variety shows, and programmes for children. Regon might or might not have had contact with Lauri Wylie. In any case, he somehow must have got hold of the script of "Dinner for One" and obtained the rights for translating and performing the sketch. It is also not known when, how, and why he and Royal moved to Germany.

Regon claims to have presented a more "authentic" version of "Dinner for One": the name of the butler is not James, but Higson;[7] the Admiral does not have a name at all, shouts "cheers" instead of "skol", and the meal has only three courses (Mayr, *A-Z* 115-16; 129). The comedy duo Regon and Royal seems to have done fairly well with their live performances of "Gedächtnismahl" and other variety acts. They even did the sketch on East German television. Despite the German translation of the text, they presented themselves as "English" as the short notice in *Neues Deutschland* from 20 March 1978 corroborates:

> Am Ostersonnabend [25 March] serviert Reiner Süß [in the popular television show *Da liegt Musike drin*] ein buntes Programm. Der Gastgeber begrüßt zum erstenmal den humoristischen Lyriker Hansgeorg Stengel sowie Miß Royal und Mr. Regon. Dieses englische Komödiantenpaar spielt die weltberühmte Story von der steinalten englischen Lady und ihrem vertrottelten Butler im "Dinner for one".[8]

The very first broadcast of "Dinner for One" in East Germany seems to have been a one-off. The sketch was never shown on East German television on New Year's Eve. The first broadcast of the NDR version took place on 30 December 1988 at 21.25 (Deutsches Rundfunkarchiv).

More erasures and hauntings can be observed concerning the first broadcast on West German television: "Dinner for One" premiered on 9 December 1961 on *Bitte lassen Sie sich unterhalten*, starring Evelyn Künneke (Mayr, *A-Z* 15).[9] Dunkhase worked as director and producer of the show and seems to have actively suppressed knowledge about this (40). One wonders what he and Frankenfeld were really discovering on their trip to Blackpool and why most people still cling to the old story. Mayr published his findings about the first broadcast in an article in *Die Süddeutsche Zeitung* in 2010, and they are occasionally mentioned in publications on the internet along the lines of "Zwölf skurrile Dinge zum Silvesterspaß". Documentaries and the website of the NDR, however, still reiterate: "Am 8. März 1963 wird 'Dinner for One' in *Guten Abend, Peter Frankenfeld* zum ersten

[7] Pointing out that butlers in Britain were never addressed by their first names. Regon has a point here, although there are some counter-examples in fiction. The name of Hercule Poirot's butler is George (or Georges); he does not seem to have a last name. Michael Carr's song "Dinner for One, Please James" (1935) even features a butler called James (Mayr, *A-Z* 83-4).

[8] Unfortunately, the broadcast has not been archived and all traces of "Gedächtnismahl" seem to be lost (Deutsches Rundfunkarchiv).

[9] Which is a nice twist because Lauri Wylie adapted an operetta by Künneke's father Eduard, *Song of the Sea* (German title: *Lady Hamilton*, 1926), for the London stage in 1928.

Mal im Fernsehen ausgestrahlt" (NDR). Maybe an unsuccessful show presented by a woman (known for her unconventional moral values) was less palatable than the story of a popular television personality known for his debonair paternalistic charm on the razzle with his chum Dunkhase in Blackpool.

The legendary first, actually the second, broadcast on German television in the show *Guten Abend, Peter Frankenfeld* has equally been questioned. Graham McCann points out that the official run of the show had ended in 1961. At least, the studio recording in 1963 took place without any doubt between 30 April and 4 May at the NDR studio in Hamburg. Frinton and Warden got a remuneration of 4,150 Deutschmark (plus travel expenses and per diems).[10] This version was first aired on 8 June 1963 (Mayr, *A-Z* 15; 59; McCann). So far, so cheerio.

But there is more than one version of this recording. Frinton and Warden first did a take without audience. After this, at the behest of Frinton, NDR employees were invited to watch – and to react to – the show. In Germany and Austria, the viewers are accustomed to the loud laughter by the studio audience. Other countries show the laughterless version. In Sweden and Norway, people even watch a completely different production. Swiss television SFR recorded the sketch in March 1963, without an introduction in German, with a slightly different set, different camera positions, and less comic stage business. This was first broadcast the same year as part of a revue called *Night Club*, the Swiss entry for the Montreux Festival. Despite its slightly shorter and less elaborate setup, the Swiss version of "Dinner for One" sold to Sweden and Norway and has become traditional viewing on New Year's Eve and Christmas respectively.

The Spirit of the BBC

The popularity of "Dinner for One" is mainly a continental European phenomenon, enhanced (and maybe produced?) by the regular repetitions. In the United Kingdom, only specialists and ardent fans know about the sketch. British commentators see the "Dinner-for-One" phenomenon as continental whim, based on a lacking sense of taste and humour. Lydia sums up the general sentiment in her comment:

> I have to say it was painful to sit through. Painfully, painfully bad and unfunny. That's why it has never caught on in Britain. I suppose we must have a very different sense of humour to that of Scandinavia and the German-speaking countries. We don't consider it funny if someone falls over something. (qtd. in Eger)

"We" not only seem to forget that Frinton was very successful in Britain with the sketch, but also ignore British comedy giants like Monty Python and sketches like

[10] This does not sound much today, but at the time it was a respectable sum. The average yearly income in West Germany was 7,775 Deutschmark (Statista).

"Upper Class Twit of the Year" (1970) where the characters constantly fall over something, to great critical acclaim.

Common knowledge also has it that the BBC never broadcast "Dinner for One". This is only half true, however. It is true that neither the BBC nor the commercial broadcasters indulge in the televisionary New Year's Eve ritual and that neither of the British companies recorded their own version. But the BBC did show the SFR's *Night Club* (including "Dinner for One") in connection with the Montreux Festival on 9 June 1963 (McCann; BBC). Thus, the claim of BBC spokesperson Mark Herley in 2003 that the broadcaster has "never heard of" the sketch (qtd. in Knauer) is wrong. Meanwhile, the NDR recording of the sketch premiered in 2018 on Sky Arts, without any discernible effects on the British public.

Herley, Lydia, and other experts on British humour imply that television in the UK ignores "Dinner for One" for reasons of quality.[11] McCann offers a more pragmatic and very plausible motivation, not due to disinterest on the side of the BBC or ITV, but because Frinton "resisted filming 'Dinner for One' for British television – because he feared that such nationwide exposure would diminish its ongoing appeal as the central element of his theatrical productions" (McCann).

Spectral Speculations

German scholars and experts explain the BBC's reluctance with general cultural factors, betraying peculiar ideas about Britain. Media scholar Rainer Stollmann, for instance, assumes that Frinton's origins "vom Tingeltangel" are to blame, because "der Graben zur ehrwürdigen BBC" is too wide (qtd. in Knauer). But even the old Reithian BBC with its emphasis on news and education broadcast variety shows, pantomimes, and comedy like Wylie's *Wireless Puppets*. In the 1960s, with Director General Hugh Carleton Greene, the programme-makers ostentatiously supported popular formats. During his directorship, sitcom and satire flourished (Briggs 335-40). Moreover, the BBC did not shy away from offering genuine "Tingeltangel": *The Black and White Minstrel Show* (1958-78), which featured singers and dancers in blackface, was a "popular favourite" among (probably white) viewers (Briggs 341). Variety stars like Danny LaRue – famous for his drag acts – transferred their nightclub performances to the small screen. There was even a long-running nostalgic reverence to the music hall with the fitting title *The Good Old Days* (1953-83). It tried to recreate the atmosphere of early twentieth-century music halls. Both performers and audience wore period costumes and the audience was invited to sing along and interact with the people on stage. Almost as a

[11] Maybe this is going to change after King Charles III earned empathetic laughter at the State Banquet and a round of applause in the Bundestag when he mentioned "Dinner for One" and "the same procedure as every year, James" in his speeches on the close Anglo-German relationship on 29 and 30 March 2023. Or maybe not.

matter of course, Frinton was a guest with his "drunk" in July 1966 (Lincolnshire Lass).

Mayr supplies another hypothesis connected with the sketch itself: its content might have been deemed offensive. This comprises "die Darstellung stark alkoholisierter Adliger wie Sir Toby" and the similarities between Miss Sophie and Queen Elizabeth. In his article for *Der Spiegel*, Sebastian Knauer sums up: "So ein 'knallhartes Antimonarchie-Stück', vermutet Mayr, sende die BBC als 'Körperschaft des öffentlichen Rechts mit königlichem Charakter' einfach nicht" ("Lachen").

Maybe Mayr's hypothesis got lost in translation, and maybe Knauer should have taken it with a pinch of salt. The BBC is a corporation with a royal charter, but its character is far from royal or regal. Moreover, British comedy thrives on drunk and silly aristocrats with Sir Toby Belch from *Twelfth Night* as classic example. British comedies of the early twentieth century were often peopled with aristocrats in undignified positions, among them the very popular *Me and My Girl* (1937) and Wylie and Lane's *Sweetheart Mine*. Especially music hall and variety operated with the "debunking" of authority figures (Hoggart 66). Admittedly, monarchy was exempt from this, but the parallels between 90-year-old Miss Sophie and ostentatiously happily married mother in her prime Elizabeth Windsor (by the time "Dinner for One" was first broadcast) seem spurious, if non-existent.

Conclusion

The "Furz aus einem Varieté-Theater" (Dunkhase 5) leaves many open questions, starting with the lives and deaths of the 'real' Sir Toby, Admiral von Schneider, Mr Pommeroy, and Mr Winterbottom and the hung-over morning after the dinner, continuing with the lives of Lauri Wylie, Ernest E. Regon, June Royal, the original text of "Dinner for One", and its transfer to Germany, and ending with the reasons for the diametrically opposed reception of the sketch in Britain and on the continent. In this respect, "Dinner for One" is a truly haunted text, it resists closure and "one cannot assume coherence of identification or determination" (Wolfreys 70).

Both text and context are haunted by "voices from the past" (Jean-Michel Rabeté qtd. in Wolfreys 72). Intriguingly, most of these voices come from the margins: from Blackpool, Grimsby, Bexhill-on-Sea, and Shoreham-by-Sea, from the British Jewish community, European immigrants, members of the working class. The notion of "Dinner for One" being not more than a "fart" fits in with the paradoxical oscillations involved in these hauntings. Apart from highlighting the limits of research and learned speculations, maybe the story of "Dinner for One" indicates that borders between Britain and the rest of the world, between high and

low, British and German humour, between the living and the dead are more permeable than is dreamt of in our current philosophy.

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