

Actor, Gentleman

Les Tremayne at 90

BY GARDNER KISSACK

If ever there was a voice meant to be heard by millions of people—and *was* heard by millions—it is the voice of Les Tremayne, actor, broadcast historian, gentleman.

Few, if any, voices have been heard by so many, over so many years, in so many roles on radio and television, in films, the theatre, commercials, and documentaries.

His confident dulcet tones can be soothing or crisp and while difficult to describe accurately, once heard they are not forgotten and are easily recognized. In fact, early in the 1940s, his voice was selected one of the three most distinctive and recognizable in the coun-



Les Tremayne

LES TREMAYNE COLLECTION

try, along with those of Franklin D. Roosevelt and Bing Crosby. Some company.

Les Tremayne was born in London, April 16, 1913, and emigrated from England to the United States in 1917 when he was four. His family eventually settled in Chicago and he attended Lake View High School before enrolling at Northwestern University and later at Columbia in New York City and UCLA, where he studied, at various times, drama,

Greek drama, and archaeology.

After high school graduation, and despite his father's reluctance and scepticism, Les applied for an audition at WGN radio. He made the audition, did well, and began to get jobs. His first pay raise, he recalls, was \$2 per show "which was up from nothing per show." Later, the salary for his first network show (*Fu Manchu*) was \$15. His career in broadcasting had begun. He was on his way.

Gardner Kissack of Chicago Heights, Illinois is a volunteer tour guide for the Museum of Broadcast Communications, a member of the Those Were The Days support staff and a collector of vintage radio and television receivers.



H. Lester Tremayne
Early postal card photo for fans.

Still in his early twenties, he appeared on some of the most popular radio programs ever aired, including *First Nighter* (often referred to as "The Little Theatre Off Times Square") which came from Chicago and later the West Coast, but never from Manhattan. For that program he wore, on occasion, an elegant tuxedo and top hat for the studio audience, to complement the glamour of an evening at a Broadway opening, imagined as it was.

On February 18, 1939 he was featured with close friend and *First Nighter* co-star Barbara Luddy on the cover of *Radio Guide* magazine.

Some of his other programs were *Grand Hotel*, *The Thin Man*, *Betty and Bob*, *The Falcon*, and *The Romance of Helen Trent*, where he portrayed the original leading man, Grant Douglas (in the early 1930s).

He hosted *Hallmark Hall of Fame*, and with wife Alice Reinhart, produced, wrote, and performed *The Tremaynes in New York City*, a half-hour show broadcast six days a week covering a wide variety of topics and activities. Other radio work included *Lux Radio Theater*; *Ma Perkins*; *Burns and Allen*; *Jack Armstrong*; *Chandu, the Magician*; *The Woman in My House*; *Grand Central Station*; *Inner Sanctum*; *Life Can Be Beautiful*; *Flash Gordon*; *I Love a Mystery*; *The Big Story*; *Mary Marlin*; *The Whistler* and dozens more, some 30,000 performances on radio, by one estimate.

At one point, for three years in Chicago in the late 1930s and early '40s, he was doing forty-five radio shows a week.

"It was the greatest training for actors that ever existed," he has said, sometimes going on the air without benefit of rehearsal. "You'd arrive at the studio, they'd hand you a script, and it was air time. You just hoped you'd get the voices right and you had to figure out ways of getting from one [studio] to another as quickly as you



Les Tremayne and Barbara Luddy
The First Nighter Program (1936-43)

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Les Tremayne as Mike Waring
Adventures of the Falcon (1948-51)

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could.” There was always the problem of the bridges over the Chicago River being up when actors were trying to get to a studio north or south of the river. Fortunately, the Merchandise Mart (NBC) and the Wrigley Building (CBS) were both north of the river—but there were other studios and stations south of the river.

(There was, in fact, a “Bridge-Is-Up Club,” whose “members” had experiences trying to get to a station on time only to be delayed by boats in the river causing the Michigan Avenue or Wells Street or State Street or Dearborn Street bridge to be raised, halting auto and pedestrian traffic until the vessels, with their traditional navigational rights, passed by, as many Chicago radio actors can attest. The excuse of the bridge being up was also used to cover other reasons for being tardy to a rehearsal or broadcast!)

First Nighter was but one of the programs Les Tremayne especially

relished doing (from 1936-'43).

He starred in the title role as *The Falcon* in the late 1940s (a role played in the early '50s by Les Damon), and teamed with Alice Hill for the *Betty and Bob* series.

By 1943 he had left Chicago for Hollywood and New York City, where for several years he was so busy that he had no time for vacation or leisure travel. One day, at his wife's urging, “I took off across country in my (1949) MG TC” — his prized and cherished car — for a “most memorable trip.” A few years later, for relaxation, he bought a “little ranch” in northern California, where “you can wash your soul.”

His television work, merely several hundred programs (although one source suggested some 3,000 appearances), started in 1939 in Chicago on W9XYZ, the Zenith experimental station. He was a video pioneer at a time when few people



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Les Tremayne and Alice Reinheart
The Tremaynes in New York City (1940s)

had ever seen a television set and even fewer had them. (There were but 6,000 TV receivers made in the U.S. during the entire decade of the 1930s, most for research labs and homes in narrow broadcast lanes in the East.) He later starred in three TV series: *Ellery Queen* (1958-59) as Ellery's father, inspector Richard Queen; *One Man's Family* and *Shazam*, a program for youngsters based on the "Captain Marvel" comic book. He guest-starred on *Lux Video Theatre*, *Red Skelton*, *Perry Mason*, *The Rifleman*, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, *Bonanza*, *Hunter* and dozens more. And for a little variety, he was Big Daddy, Boss Hogg's father on *Dukes of Hazzard*.

He has been an active speaker and lecturer at nostalgia conventions and meetings from coast-to-coast. As a charter member of the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, he was a delegate

and bronze medal recipient at the union's 50th anniversary meeting in 1987.

Certainly one of his proudest achievements came in the mid-1980s when he co-hosted and co-produced *Please Stand By, A History of Radio* for the Southern California Consortium of Community Colleges, an accredited course of thirty half-hour programs. It has been called the most compelling and comprehensive, important and instructive, enjoyable and entertaining audio radio history ever aired.

Also important to him is his work at the Braille Institute for the Blind, where he conducted weekly seminars on the golden days of radio. He is, naturally, a life member of the Pacific Pioneer Broadcasters, as he was one of the original founders of that organization in California.

Some of his (at least) thirty motion pictures have been *North By Northwest*, *The*



Donald O'Connor and Les Tremayne
I Love Melvin (1953)



Donald O'Connor and Les Tremayne
Pacific Pioneer Broadcasters meeting (1991)

MARGARET WARREN PHOTO

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Perfect Furlough, Goldfinger, The War of the Worlds, Francis Goes to West Point, The Fortune Cookie, A Man Called Peter, I Love Melvin, The Story of Ruth, Say One For Me, The Slime People, The Lieutenant Wore Skirts, Susan Slept Here, and The Angry Red Planet.

He has announced for such TV shows as *Mary Tyler Moore* and *Medical Center*, and has been spokesman for Lincoln Continental, Sunbeam, McDonald's, and Chevrolet, among others.

Away from the radio microphones and television and movie cameras, he has participated in archaeological digs in the U.S. and Mexico, serving as official photographer, and he has lectured on Mayan and Aztec history numerous times.

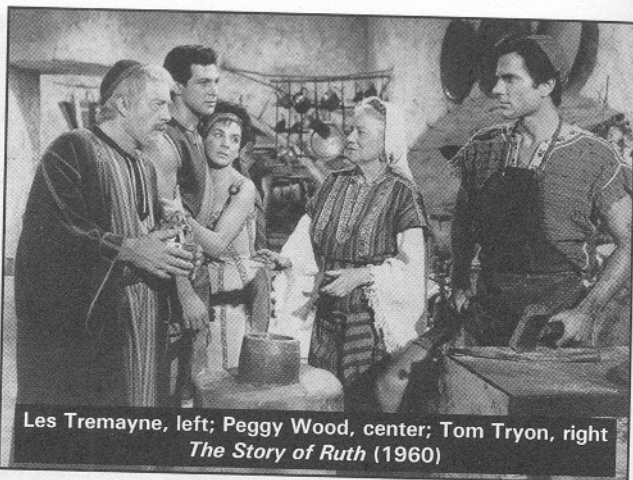
Les enjoys telling a formerly little-known tale from years ago when he bought a house in a Hollywood neighborhood of family homes where everyone knew everyone else.

Shortly after he moved in, one of his new neighbors asked a friend who Les was and what he did. "Oh, he's in TV," the friend

explained. A few weeks later when the new neighbor's television set went out, she thought it handy to have a TV man close and called Les to fix her set. Les, amused, took some tools and went to the neighbor's, turned a few screws and knobs and "fixed" the set. Later, he recounts gleefully, her vacuum cleaner broke so she called him again and he, of course, attempted another repair, still reluctant to explain how he was "in TV."

Margaret Warren of the Midwest Broadcast Pioneers, who met Les in California years ago, remembers his visit back to Chicago when he was inducted into the Radio Hall of Fame in November 1995 — an evening when he met friends and fans,

graciously and warmly, at every turn. "It was an elegant, black-tie event, giving Les a well-deserved honor that he has truly cherished. The next day I took Les and his wife Joan in my car all around the North Side (of Chicago) and the North Shore searching out apartments where Les had lived and schools he had attended. Even though he was born



Les Tremayne, left; Peggy Wood, center; Tom Tryon, right
The Story of Ruth (1960)

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Sheree North and Les Tremayne
The Lieutenant Wore Skirts (1956)

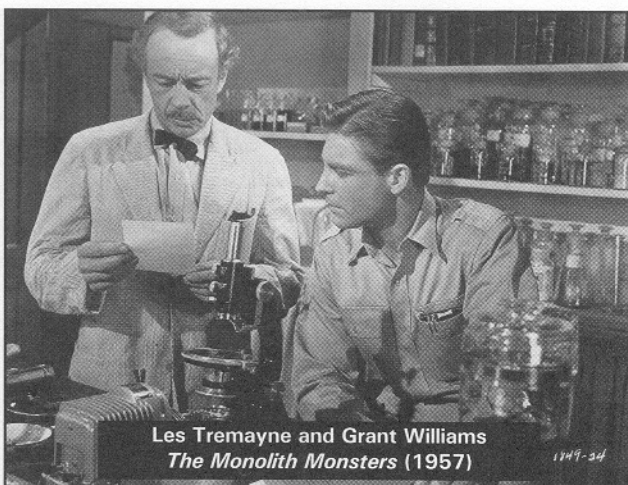
PHOTOFEST

in England, much of his growing up was done in Chicago, where his broadcast career began.

“He would notice a school or apartment building, hop out of the car, snap a picture, and recall what he remembered from earlier times. We topped off that tour feasting on burgers at Hackney’s in Glenview.”

On an earlier visit to Chicago in 1990 he stopped by *Those Were The Days* one Saturday afternoon, then broadcasting from the Museum of Broadcast Communications in River City. Fellow future-Hall of Famer Chuck Schaden devoted the entire program to him and conducted a Tremayne seminar, during which Les recalled meeting Edgar Bergen on the West Coast in the 1940s and discovering they both had attended Lake View High School —although not at the same time, Bergen being ten years older.

Once, when Chicago radio’s Wally Phillips was asked about his favorite films, he included *North By Northwest*, and when Les Tremayne’s name was mentioned, Wally immediately responded with, “Thirteen hundred, do I hear thirteen hundred dollars?”...Les’ lines as the auctioneer in



Les Tremayne and Grant Williams
The Monolith Monsters (1957)

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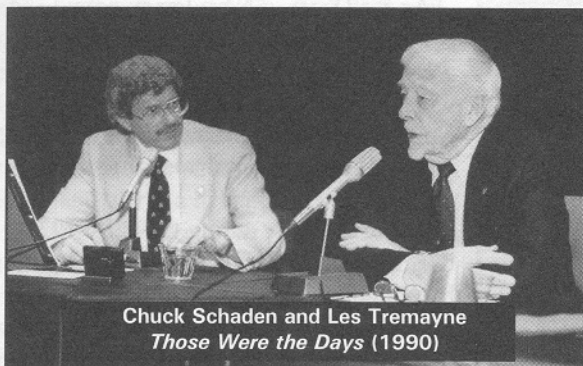
the *North By Northwest* scene where Cary Grant tries to get arrested for his own safety. The 1959 film, shown often and still popular, ranks as one of Hitchcock’s finest films.

Today Les still attends some West Coast radio fan conventions in spite of the health problems he has had over the past several years and he keeps busy working with his wife on his autobiography.

This, then, is a glimpse of Les Tremayne at 90, the star of radio, television, film, and theatre; the broadcast historian, archaeologist, and gentleman —not merely a man for all seasons or a Renaissance man— but a down-to-earth English-American whose talent and experience and good deeds have made him a guiding light in a field of many bright lights — the distinctive and distinguished, generous and genuine, unforgettable Les Tremayne. ■

Readers who would like to send a card or letter to Les Tremayne on his 90th birthday, may write to him c/o Nostalgia Digest, Box 421, Morton Grove, IL 60053.

Tune in TWTD April 12 for a salute to Les Tremayne.



Chuck Schaden and Les Tremayne
Those Were the Days (1990)

MARGARET WARREN PHOTO