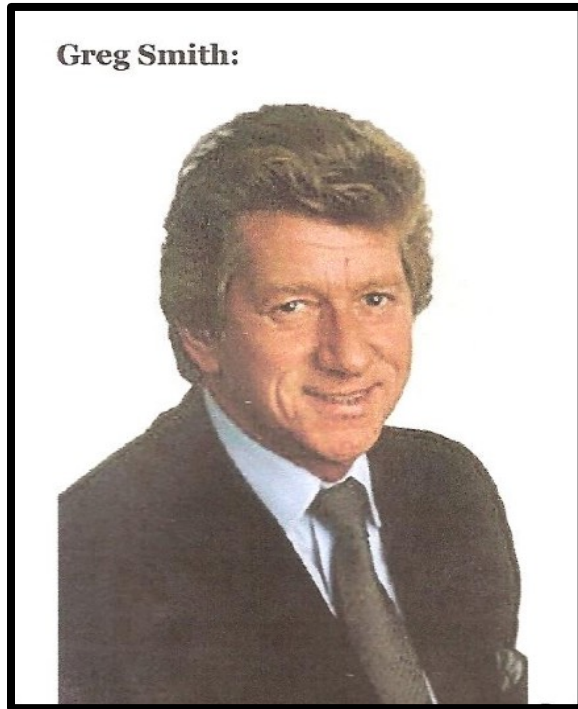


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## *Greg Smith..... Producer*



I wonder how many of you remember the hugely successful Confession's series of films for Columbia Pictures:

- Confessions of a Window Cleaner.
- Confessions of a Pop Performer.
- Confessions from a Holiday Camp.
- Confessions of a Driving Instructor.

If so, did you know that the producer Greg Smith was a Laindon boy, although born in Twickenham in 1939, he was bought up by his aunt in Laindon from an early age after his parents died.

Brian Cordell commenting on the Laindon & District Community Archive website remembers that he had a 'drop handlebar' push bike, a lot of hair and a saddle bag on his bike which always looked like it was stuffed with books. Another comment by Colin Pegrum confirms that he lived in Elizabeth Drive with Mrs Smith who he understood was his mother but as we now know

was probably his aunt. With the Basildon Development Corporation moving the family they moved firstly to a bungalow in Waverley Road then later to St David's Road, Langdon Hills.

He went to Laindon High Road School and became Head Boy. His initial drama experience was with the Youth Drama Group that operated out of the Laindon Community Centre. In 1955 the Group changed its name to the Community Drama Club (C.D.C.) and its first performance at the New Hall in 1959 was 'Sailor Beware' and in it was Greg, he appeared in a number of dramas during the 1950s, another being 'Ring for Cathy'.

He went to a drama school in London and on leaving at the age of 15 he joined the Argyle Theatre Touring Company. It was in 1958 while he was travelling back and forth to Fenchurch Street, London on the Laindon line that he was involved in the Dagenham Train Crash on the night of 30<sup>th</sup> January 1958.

Jean Pattle a friend was waiting on Fenchurch Street Station to catch the 6.35pm train with a group of friends when she realised the early train had not gone, so shouting to her friends she jumped in the last carriage, just before the train pulled out.

Jean's report in an article on the Laindon & District Community Archive site informs us that the 6.35pm train which her friends were on' ran into the back of her train. She was trapped for some time and appears to have passed out. The following are her words:

*'I heard a voice call my name and realised it was my friends I had left at Fenchurch Station; they were looking for me. They had been on the 6:35 which had run into us but thankfully they were unhurt. One of the boys Greg Smith stayed with me all the time it took for the firemen to get me free, then one fireman carried me in his arms with my badly broken back, up the steep embankment at the side of the track and laid me on the ground'.*

He took a job as a runner to impresario Bernard Delfont and later he worked as a theatrical agent with Billy Marsh and MCA (Music Corporation of America). This organisation closed in 1964 so at the young age of 25 he established his own talent agency in London's Golden Square (Soho) and assembled a respectable client list of producers, directors and writers including the Irish-born film maker Norman Cohen.

Greg and Norman set up Prophet Enterprises and together they made the documentaries, "Brendan Behan's Dublin" and "The London nobody knows".

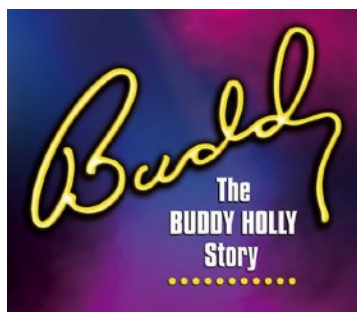
The film 'The London nobody knows' shocked film audiences with flat capped James Mason exploring the seedy streets of post war London and poverty. It initially went out as a support film to the movie version of 'Till Death Us Do Part' (1965).

**Television sitcoms being transferred to the Cinema in the 1970s was becoming big business, resulting in Greg and Norman acquiring the rights to Dad's Army for Columbia Pictures with the film version being released in 1971. This was soon followed by the film based on Spike Milligan's novel "Adolf Hitler – My Part in His Downfall" for United Artists.**

Our Greg was on his way and with the relaxation of censorship for broader comedies he teamed up with the director, Val Guest for the first Confessions film.

Greg in 2001 said: "I don't think British sex films were ever really sexy, they were risqué but that's how British people liked it. All I wanted to do was to make people laugh. I didn't want to push things for the sake of it but I think the censor was in a state of shock!"

While all this was going on Greg married Cheryl Cocklin who was later to become Michael Barrymore's wife. Greg went on to marry Lynda Bellingham (The OXO mum and TV's "ALL Creatures Great and Small" as well as roles in Dr. Who) and this what she had to say on their first meet: *'My first husband, Greg Smith, a struggling young film producer, entered my life when he came to dinner party at my flat. He was cocky and flash with an eye for the ladies but also charming and bright. He was about to make a film called Confessions of a Window Cleaner, a more risqué take on the Carry-On style and I suggested for the lead role an actor called Robin Askwith, whom I'd seen in a kit-kat advert.'*



Greg and Lynda married in 1975 and they held their reception in Stage 7 at Elstree studios where they were making the film 'Confessions of a Driving Instructor'. Guests included Windsor Davies and George Layton, but the marriage only lasted a year. Greg went on to marry Valerie Van Ost who was also an actress and she worked as a casting director on two of his films in the early 1980s – 'The Boys in Blue' (1982) and 'Funny Money' (1983).

Greg always believed that one of his greatest successes was co-producing "Buddy – The Buddy Holly Story" with Laurie Mansfield

and Paul Elliott. It opened at the Victoria Palace Theatre, London in 1989. It moved to the Strand Theatre in 1995 and after 13 years it left the West End for UK and European tours. It won many awards.

In 1998 he produced the film 'Animal Farm' in a production studio he set up in the Luggala Valley, Wicklow Mountains, Ireland. He used live animals and animatronic doubles.

The following are a few more of his other credits:

- Never Too Young to Rock (1975) – Musical film starring Glitter Band.
- The Importance of Being Dublin (1975) – Documentary
- Stand up, Virgin Soldiers (1977) starring Robin Askwith and Greg's wife at the time, Lynda Bellingham
- Remake of 'The 39 Steps' (1978) starring Robert Powell, John Mills
- Night Nurse (1978)
- David Copperfield (1999)

Moving to Television he produced:

- The Shillingbury Blowers (1980)
- Rude Health (1989) – Channel 4 sitcom
- Great Expectations (1989)
- Magwitch – starring Anthony Hopkins which received four Emmy nominations.
- Othello for the BBC

Back to the stage:

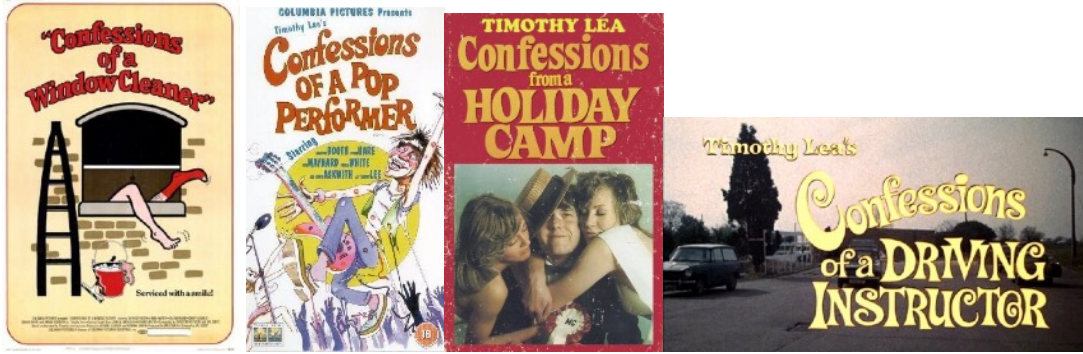
- Royal Opera House production of 'Porgy and Bess' (1993)
- Musical 'Jolson' with Brian Conley in the title role (1996)
- Great Balls of Fire (1999)
- Animal Crackers
- Zipp (2003)

In the early 2000's we find Greg involved romantically with Shirley Bassey but again the relationship did not last and it is understood that Shirley was devastated over the split, she believed they were destined to end their days together. It is understood a heart attack and work load put pay to the relationship.

Finally, just before he died on 19 February 2009, he married for the fourth time to Gloria Thomas.

One obituary said: 'It is my sad duty to announce that my friend and Sex Comedy Legend, Greg Smith has died at the age of 69.

Greg spent the majority of his years working out of Elstree Studio and reporter Paul Burton shortly after his death suggested to them it would be good to see a stage, a room or an area of the studios named after him-----has it happened?



Basildon Borough Heritage Society  
Ken Porter  
2016