



Unheard Voices: interviews with deafened people

Stephanie Pennell
Interviewed by John Newton

British Library ref. C1345/42

IMPORTANT

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Interview Summary Sheet

Ref no: C1345/42

Collection title: Unheard Voices: interviews with deafened people

Interviewee's surname:	Pennell	Title:	
Interviewee's forename:	Stephanie	Sex:	Female
Occupation:		Date and place of birth:	1948, Leicester

Date(s) of recording: 5th April 2009

Location of interview: The Bruntsfield Hotel, Edinburgh

Name of interviewer: John Newton

Speech to Text reporter: Lynn Allen

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Interviewer's comments:

[Track 1]

This is John Newton interviewing Stephanie on 5th April for the unheard voices project. Speech to text reporter is Lynn. Now Stephanie, you have to identify yourself as well with your full name and occupation and so on. I will prompt you if necessary can you give me your full name?

My full name is Stephanie Mary Pennell. And I was born on 20th April 1948 in Leicester.

What else do we have to have? Your education, tell me where you were educated?

I was educated at St Mary's Field Junior School and then at Collegiate Girls Grammar School in Leicester. And then I went for a year on a business course, a business studies course to Charles Keene College again in Leicester.

Where is that, the college?

The college does not exist any longer. It was on Abbey Park Road near Abbey Park.

In Leicester?

Yes.

I can't see why we have the go into things like leisure at this stage because my understanding and this is simply to identify us for future historians listening to this. So I am going to miss out the last bit and ask me you to tell me something about your childhood?

My childhood was, it's difficult to find words really, but I had a very extraordinary childhood. I was an only child but I had a lot of family, a lot of aunts and uncles and cousins. So I was brought up in a family, I had a mother and father but I was in fact an only child. But when I was four it was discovered at a school medical that everyone had when they were four that I had a hole in the heart and nothing could be done because medical science wasn't that far

advanced. So, I was very -- I was treated although normally and my mother didn't want me to go to what was termed a 'special school', I was very well looked after and treated very specially by everybody. Very kindly and protectively I suppose. I had regular check ups at the local infirmary, Leicester Royal Infirmary. And I had lots of memories of those. So from that point of view I had a bit of time off but that was the only thing I didn't have anything wrong with me, it wasn't ill in any sense. When I was 8 I had to go into Sheffield, which was the only cardiac surgery outside London, the only cardiac hospital outside London. And I remember being there and it was a terrible place, I hated the hospital. At 8 years old it meant I didn't see my parents. Sheffield at that time was smog-filled and I have still pictures of looking out of the hospital window and seeing my parents below in the car park, waving to me goodbye on their very infrequent visits. I was in a children's ward and I found it really upsetting, because the other children used to tell the most frightful tales of things that would happen to me in the night. How doctors would come and do the most terrible things to me. And because I was a very innocent child and had been well protected I didn't sort of consider that they might telling whoppers or anything like that. But I just found the whole experience so horrific. So it was a real pleasure to get home again. But it was a terrifying experience.

These comments made by your fellow patients, were they deliberately to wind you up then?

Probably yes.

Yes?

I think it was children being children.

[05:13]

I was going to ask you why you called your childhood extraordinary but I am beginning to understand that I think now. Tell me more about the actual illness having a hole in the heart, I am completely ignorant about that?

Well it wasn't an illness as such, it was just a condition, a congenital heart disease. When I

was 11, or between being 8 and 11 I had a lot of tests in all kinds of hospitals mostly the local hospitals and I had angiograms and cardiograms I think they were called, where wires are pushed up and down the veins in the arms just to take tests and examine the chambers of the heart. For these you were meant to be awake, so that you could cough or whatever at appropriate times, but because I was very thin child, my arms were really thin, and it was a very painful thing to do and now as an adult all my veins in my arms are so knotted and gnarled as a result of these and in fact they no longer do these tests in the arms any more, they do them through the groin and that sort of longer way up. But I had a lot of these done and then when I was 11 I was taken to London. I went on visits to London for these tests and went into the Middlesex hospital in London. Which was a big centre for cardiac people. And I was admitted to one of the adult wards there, because the children's ward was not geared up to heart conditions. And I was going to have a hole in the heart surgery. And I had the top team of consultants, Doctor Somerville who was the leading consultant was actually Winston Churchill's doctor I learned when I was there. And he was a charming man. He was lovely. Always immaculately dressed. I remember him so well. And a real gentleman and he was always very kind and patient. The first time I came upon him really was when I was having a sort of pre-med the night before tablet, I don't know what it was. It was tiny tablet and it was impossible for me to take. I simply could not take it because I wasn't used to tablets. And I was obviously making some kind of noisy fuss and he happened to be passing by and chastised the nurse very gently for making for her making me take this huge tablet, it was tiny, and he went and came back with a jar of jam and a spoon and put the tablet into a spoonful of jam and said try it this way. And of course it worked and I took my tablet. So that was plus points for him really. He had a very good bedside manner. My other doctors were Doctor Bedford, who I remember as being particularly gruff and stern. So I think you get the good and the bad. And then I had another doctor, Dr Goldberg who was also a very special doctor and who subsequently transferred from there to head the unit in Leicester at Groby Road Hospital the cardiac unit which grew and became a very leading cut edge I suppose is the word now, it became the leading heart hospital for the east Midlands, the Midlands region. At the time it was Groby Road hospital but then that moved into new premises and is now Leicester General, Leicester Glenfield hospital.

So you don't have to go so far now for treatment?

I don't now no. But I did have my hole in the heart surgery and it was a success. My parents came to see me when they can could, although they didn't have a lot of money. My aunt took them in her car so it was a very special visit.

I am sorry, this is just for clarification. How old were you at this point?

I was 11.

11?

Yes.

And why was it special because your aunt came, what made it special?

I think at that time there weren't a lot of cars around and she had rather a posh car. So it was very special. In hospital I remember coming round, I was in a side ward and when I came round I remember being in an oxygen tent. And that was also very special, because it was a huge thing over the bed, it was like being in a tent but it was so clear and fresh it was completely visible all the way round, and there was a zip in the front so the nurses could hand me medication. And I was not aware, but I am sure there must have been lots of tubes coming in and out. And there was big like an elephant's trunk at the back of me which was just wafting in this oxygen from time to time, so there was a noise of like a sea breeze coming in. And I just thought it was a wonderful experience because it was completely different to anything I had ever come across before. But the whole experience was wonderful for me, because the nurses used to come and give me different flavoured mouthwashes because I couldn't clean my teeth, I hadn't got the energy, the strength to lift up my arms or anything and they couldn't help me, but I used to get these glasses of different coloured mouthwashes come in. So that was a bit of a treat. And then the other thing that I remember from that time was that I had a passion for ballet. I had had to give up ballet before hospital.

[12:31]

Let me just stop you there, so to focus for a bit longer on your childhood. Obviously these medical experts are very memorable for you, did your illness affect your relationship with other children, or how did it affect your relationship with other children?

Erm, I don't feel that it did. Because I think I was lucky because people used to make a fuss of me and that made me feel very special. I had a lot of very close friends and while I was in hospital I used to write a lot of letters and I used to get a lot of letters back to me. And a huge number of cards. So, the ward and my all around me was covered in cards.

Were you physically not disabled, physically weak. I mean did you play normally when you were actually at home or did it affect your physical strength and so on?

Oh no, I behaved very normally I did lots of things I shouldn't.

You said the operation was successful?

Yes.

What was the effect of that?

Well, I think it took quite a long while to get over, although I cannot actually remember that. I am sure I must have been told take things steady. I remember being taken on holiday and having to go in a push chair, because I was so little it was easier to take me in a push chair than have a proper wheelchair.

How did you feel about that?

So my parents just pushed me about until I got the strength to get up and walk. But I don't remember that taking long and I didn't like being in a push chair. So I was eager to get out of that as soon as I could. But physically I don't think I was restrained and I remember Dr Goldberg used to chastise me and say 'you are burning the candle at both ends again I see'.

And I used to smile and giggle a bit. And I am sure he was right but you know you have to enjoy life. You only have one life and if there is something to be done you seize the moment really. I mean I think that has been my philosophy there if there is something there go for it.

[15:17]

So coming back to your interest in ballet then tell me about that?

Yes. I was interested in ballet from young childhood. I was not brilliant at it, but I loved doing it and I loved the world, I loved the pretence and I suppose the escapism with all the stories that I read, all the ballet books, Lorna of the Wells and the story of Anna Pavlova and a whole range of things. And my best friend at that time got a place at the Royal Ballet School and I was so envious. She had a scholarship and I knew she would be leaving but they invited me down to London to Richmond where they lived, and it was at the time when the first Russian troop came over, the Bolshoi, and the prima ballerina whose name ...no her name was Natalia Makarova I think and she actually gave my friend a master class at home. She came for tea and then gave her a master class. And it was just wonderful to watch and to be there. She had very broken English, so she was very difficult to understand. But the language of ballet was sufficient and I suppose from that point of view that was a very particular moment. But when I was in hospital I used to write ballet stories and I used to draw little stages and cut out little ballet figures and do my own ballet shows on the table in front of me on the bed. So that I had got little figures moving across the stage. And I suppose in time that is what led me to my later interest of the theatre. Because I realised that I wouldn't be able to follow the ballet and indeed after being in hospital there is no way I would be able to dance, although my feet were all right and my legs were a bit thin, but I actually had not got the strength to support them and I had got the grace to dance but I just had not got the special energy that you actually need.

When you came to that realisation how old were you then, that must have been quite important; teaching was still available I suppose did you consider it?

Well it might have been -- well I might have been 12 or so. But the movement between the

ballet and the theatre was so gradual that actually although I am still interested in ballet, the interest in theatre grew because there were no theatres to start with when I was young in Leicester. I think there were five and they were all demolished for one reason or another to make way for roads or for lack of audiences or whatever. So, that wasn't actually part of my culture at that time. But then in 1963.

But there was no ballet in Leicester either. Where did that interest come from?

Yes there were because theatre companies visited the De Montfort Hall and I used to go and see the festival ballet and the royal ballet on tour and they were wonderful.

I am sorry I interrupted you there you were telling me about how your interest in the ballet got moved towards an interest in the theatre?

Yes. I think it was probably a natural movement. And when as I was saying in 1963 the -- a new theatre was built in Leicester, a very small theatre called the Phoenix Theatre. Tiny shack of a place really. And that got my interest going and I became involved in it. I was a schoolgirl just a young girl then. And I was really interested in following it being built, and I went and took photos of it. And watched it being built, literally brick by brick, it was in a bus station. And it was just magical to see it taking shape. And I became I joined the young playgirl's group which was a youth supporting group. And part of their official society so when it had opened I attended the first night as a representative of the young people of Leicester. Which was very laudable.

How old were you then?

I think that was it might have been 16 or something like that.

You would be still at school then were you?

Yes I was, yes. I used to spend a lot of my free time there, I used to go and do my home work in the coffee bar. And I am sure I would have been thrown out if I had have been any older.

But everybody -- there was myself and two other school friends and we always used to meet up there. We were known at the three old ladies because we always used to be together, we always used to go and see the plays. We always used to spend our free time in the coffee bar talking to the actors which was of course very appealing. And to the stage management. So we knew everybody and it was just like being at home really.

You were stage struck.

I was. Very. That is when I decided I was going to become an actress.

[21:40]

Looking back on that period in your teens, your medical experiences and being in hospital and the centre of attention, do you see any parallel between that and your interest in the stage?

Oh yes, absolutely. I think the theatre represented another form of escape and that I think has actually been very important for me throughout my life. And being the centre of attention has always been very important, because that is the way I was brought up. So when I do not get attention, oh dear it is stamping feet time!

Expand on that, expand on your comment that is the way I was brought up. Tell me more about that, why do you say that?

I think being an only one tends.

Sorry?

Being an only child means that you can be the centre of attention. You are the centre of attention because you have in a good family you have all your parents' love and support. And when you are lucky to have friends you are a part of that group, so you immediately belong there. And in ballet for instance, in class somebody is always giving you attention, even if it

is saying no you are doing that wrongly, you are being put right and just guided to do it properly. And in theatre you have a very specific part to play and you are given guidance and attention and people talk to you and tell you how to do things. And I think it is all very much a oneness really.

Yes. Yes. So let me just think where we have got to. I am not taking note of the time, do you know when we started. Because I think we have been going for about half an hour have we. And we have got to your the end of your teens I think haven't we? What do you want to tell me about that period, the period when you left school and so on, tell me a bit more about that?

[24:22]

When I left school?

Yes.

It was an extension really of going to the Phoenix Theatre. I happened to be in the coffee bar one day and the administrator came pass the in a total flurry and said to me did I know anybody who could type. And I said well I can type because I was at business school. He said well look, the secretary the director's secretary had just left she has just upped and gone, and we have got a heap of typing to be done, the office is in a real state and I have nobody to help, you wouldn't like to come and help sort out some things would you? So I said 'oh I would love to', so I did. And the office was in a bit of a mess and there were a lot of letters to deal with. But I helped a bit and he had a look at what I had done and he said oh well thank you, 'that is the really good you wouldn't like to work here would you'? So I said 'oh yes please'.

And this so this really is because you were basically hanging out with your friends at the theatre were you?

Yes, I was in the right place at the right time.

That is how you got into your career, yes.

And fortunately the director seemed to like what I was doing.

When you say unfortunately, fortunately I beg your pardon?

Fortunately, yes. And yes, he seemed the like what I was doing and I suppose as long as the paperwork was kept in order then that was fine. And gradually we began to work together and we had a very good relationship. The Phoenix lasted, I worked at the Phoenix from 1969 to 1972. Then the city council had said that if the Phoenix was a success they would build a proper repertory theatre for Leicester. And the Phoenix was a success, the director made it a success and the city council stood by its word and the Haymarket Theatre was built in Leicester.

Were you involved in that in any way?

All the organisation from the Phoenix, all the staff, apart from a few that didn't want to carry on, were moved from the Phoenix to the Haymarket. So it was a very smooth transition. It was wonderful, because the Phoenix was very tiny, I think it held about 260. There was a low stage and there were two dressing rooms one male one female. One stage management office, and mezzanine storage for the costumes. That was all there was. Oh and a toilet I suppose. At the hay market there was the box office, a huge foyer and bar, an upstairs foyer and bar, a studio theatre, a main auditorium seating 750 and then the stage itself and a huge workshop at the side so that scenery could be made and pushed on stage. From behind.

From the side?

From the side of the stage there was like a big screen which could be pushed back and the set could be just pushed on stage and the screen closed again. And then there were all the administration offices, dressing rooms, and everything else at the side of the theatre. So, it was proper theatre and it that had its own stage door at the back of the building and it was just

wonderful. Again and again I can remember clearly it being built, going across the joists before the floor boards were down to get to the backstage area to have a look at the offices. And we were just like mad people because we had all been kind of twirling round and the huge space that we had suddenly got and it was really our own building again it felt like home but like a palace it was just wonderful.

[29:26]

And what was your role at that time then in the organisation, tell me about that?

At the Phoenix I had been called secretary to the director. There was one director in charge. And that director opened the Haymarket, that was Robin Ridgeley. And he had some assistant directors and an associate director. So I continued to be his secretary, but over the years my job role and title changed and eventually I became PA to the artistic director, but then there were a number of directors coming in and out, so I had a little S added on the end of director so I really looked after all the directors in a sense to a larger or lesser degree.

Describe to me your day when you were doing that job?

Every day was different.

Describe one day then?

It was usually starting with the phone, the phone would never stop ringing and that was most of what I did, working on the telephone. Fielding calls, taking messages. Between that I would do all the paperwork, answering letters, letters from actors wanting work came non-stop all day and every day. Irrespective of whether there was work available or not. It's a hugely over populated field, there is far too many actors for far too many jobs but they write letters in the hope of being seen and you have to answer them, if you can. But also writing letters, confidential matters and report work and minute taking.

How many people would be employed in the theatre on a permanent basis then, roughly?

How big was the organisation?

Well, I can't remember really. I suppose at the Phoenix there might have been about 20. But to go into the Haymarket we had to increase staff because there was like a marketing team, whereas at the Phoenix you had one person doing it at the Haymarket you had to have a whole team because it was such a huge amount of work and a huge amount of output of work. So that you perhaps would have five, maybe six people in marketing and the same for accounts. You would need three at least dealing with all the accounting. And by the end of the Haymarket when the Haymarket finished there were 80 people who were made redundant. So eighty was not like a regular amount, but that was at a peak time I suppose.

[32:44]

Now, I remember from the notes I was given, I think you were also involved in amateur theatre were you?

Yes. That was my hobby.

Tell me about that?

That was my hobby.

Yes tell me about that?

I didn't have a lot of time for my hobby, because most of my time was spent in working, my working day would start at 10, 9.30 or 10 and go on until about 7 o'clock normally, or later if it was a busy time like setting up a big show or a musical or if it was a first night or I had to be working late. So the hours varied. But if I had time then I would go to the Little Theatre, which was part of the little theatre guild which is a national body. I was -- I joined there when I was 16 and I first appeared before that in a none speaking role after I had come out of hospital having my hole in the heart mended. They were doing *The Miracle Worker*, which was the story of Helen Keller, and they needed some poor looking or fan blind or fans, so I

was a natural really because I was very pale and my shoulders were kind of bent over from having laid in bed for so long so I was really pathetic looking. And I was really type-cast probably. So that was my first appearance and I didn't have to say anything at all but just look very poorly. But then when I was 16 I joined as a proper member and I took part in their theatre workshops and learned the process of becoming an actress. Then I gradually started to get parts, I auditioned for parts. It took me a long time to get established and for people to know my face and the first part I think it might have been I think it was in *Rebecca*, I played Mrs DeWinter it was rather a pathetic sort of lady. She wasn't beautiful and she was always being compared to Rebecca, who died. So I was really rather withdrawn in that and a bit sort of dowdy and not terribly interesting as a woman, a young woman shall I say. But that was a good experience, I don't know that I did it especially well, I don't remember, but I found it really interesting to be doing it. But then my next part was to play Anne Frank in *The Diary of Anne Frank* and that was terrific. It was such an experience. I had such fun doing it. We had so many laughs, I mean it is perhaps an awful thing to say, but it was a really happy experience and I think probably from the awfulness of the situation. We had to laugh because otherwise we would spend a lot of time in tears. But it played to wonderful houses and at the end of each performance there was silence, nobody clapped because nobody knew what to do. And it was obviously people had been so moved by what they had seen and that was a very strange experience.

You were a big success in that were you personally?

I think I gave it my best shot. And I like to think I was successful. And people do still even now remember. It was one of the shows where I wore long grey socks, so that was pretty memorable! But I have to say it was at a time when I had just had a pacemaker put in, I have a pace ma maker to keep my heart beating, and I had just had a pacemaker before we started rehearsals. And so the director was a bit iffy about casting me because time had been so young for me and there were various bits so I had to be pretty lively and jumping around. So in rehearsal I was not allowed to jump about because I think the director thought I might die or something on stage. So I didn't really jump, I was not allowed to jump about but at one point I actually had to leap on to a chair in order to see out of a window to talk about the clock and looking out at the sky and the trees, which is a beautiful passage and there was no way I

could do that standing on the floor because I had got to look out and just visualise. I mean obviously I was not looking out of a window, but in my mind's eye I had to do this. So, I had to leap on to a chair and then afterwards I had to leap off and then be really lively. But I couldn't do it unless I was on this chair and I could see the director going 'arghh' in a sort of fit in case everything came apart but I did it and I just felt so good, you know the fact that I had actually done that.

You didn't feel disabled or anything by your illness at this stage? You felt good?

No it wasn't an illness it was just part of the -- part of the heart condition that I had got. I don't consider that the heart business is an illness at all. I don't actually think about it really apart from for the purpose of this interview.

[39:30]

Well let's talk about, because I suppose let's move on to when you first became aware of your deafness. Thinking back can you identify when you first started thinking 'I am deaf', or my hearing is going or something?

Yes, I do remember it quite well. There were two things really. The first one was when I went to a Stephen Sondheim musical. Now I have always had a bit of problems with Sondheim music, because it always is a bit off key and different to other music. But this was I think it was *Into The Woods*, and it was really really discordant to me. And the musicians seemed to be playing it wrongly and the singers didn't seem to be singing in time with the music and they seemed to be missing notes. And I looked at the MD the musical director and I was thinking why is he letting people perform in this way, there is something terribly wrong and I thought it was perhaps the microphones that were not working or something like that. So that was my first sort of inkling. But then I had to go into hospital.

Sorry, sorry let me just stop you there, so how old were you then can you remember?

Well that was in 1997.

Yes?

That musical.

That is quite recently then, '97 you said?

Yes. But before then I had to go into hospital for a cardioversion which is where the doctors put electrical paddles I think they are on your chest, I think that is what they are called and they put electric charges into you to get your heartbeat to go regularly which mine was not. And they did that three or four times but it didn't work. But they give you some kind of drug in the back of your hand, some kind of medication to just calm you down or whatever. And I remember that I couldn't hear what he was saying and I had to keep asking him to speak louder and in the end he was standing in the middle of the ward, I mean it didn't occur to him to come to me, but he was standing in the middle of the ward yelling at me and I was really upset, because I thought 'why is he speaking in this way?' Why does not he firstly come to me and speak and secondly yell at me in this very unpleasant and rude way. And again it never occurred to me that perhaps the reason was because I was not hearing him. So, those were the two particular incidents.

The incident in the hospital came after the incident with the musical play did it or did it?

I think the hospital came first.

Yes.

And then the musical.

Thinking back before those events do you think you had any intimation before that that your hearing was not right?

I think I possibly did because I noticed that I had to go to have wax removed from my ears

quite often. And the nurses said you should really only come perhaps once every 6 months, but I was needing come back more than that. And so I went to the doctor, I saw the doctor as opposed to the nurse although I had been to the doctor and she said 'yes you have got a build up you need to be syringed so go to see the nurse' but the nurse eventually said you are coming back too many times I am going to let the doctor speak to you. So, I saw my doctor who was absolutely wonderful, she is a very patient and kind lady, Dr Hollington.

This is your GP?

My GP, yes. She said yes I think you might have a problem and I am going to refer you to the hearing clinic, which is attached to Leicester Royal Infirmary. So she did that and eventually I had an appointment with the hearing therapist, Ena Martin and she was wonderful. She was so gentle and kind and understanding and she listened exactly to what I found and how things had been going on and she said 'yes I think you do have a problem'. She gave me a hearing test and that was pretty conclusive that I was suffering from hearing loss. And I talked about how I felt, because I was feeling pretty distressed

[45:13]

How did you feel?

When I realised that the hearing loss was something that wouldn't go away it was actually a big problem, because my whole life depended on my hearing. My job, my way of life, my career, my social life, my friends, my family, everything; and if I couldn't hear them as was proving apparent, then I wasn't going to have a life. So, I found it really, really upsetting. And when I talked to Ena Martin, I suppose the reality actually struck me there and then because I hadn't cried before then. But when I spoke to Ena then it all became very real and very horrible and I was with her for a very, very long time and she understood. And there was nothing she could do to ease the distress that I was feeling and she was not able to say 'well actually it will get better in time' because she said 'I don't think it will. So, you know, this is something you are going to have to live with. So we have to find ways of making it possible, for you to cope with it'. And this is what the first time that I heard about LINK and she asked

me if I knew about LINK and of course I did not. I had no idea what it was. And she explained that it was a centre for rehabilitation, for deafened people, for rehabilitation campaigning and generally looking after people with hearing loss.

Let me stop you there, because I would like to talk to you about that obviously, about what happened next. But would you like to have a little break shall we?

I am all right to carry on.

Are you okay Lynn oh right.

[47:55]

Before we go on to talk about what you have been doing since then, do you think there was a bit of a paradox in this meeting with the hearing therapist, which you said she was very sympathetic but did you also -- also in effect confronted you with the situation did it which you found very depressing. Am I understanding you correctly?

She did confront me with it, but I found it distressing. The depression did not hit me until later for other reasons. But she offered me some kind of something else with LINK. So, if somebody offers you a helping hand or a step forward then that is something to seize. So I took that and she referred me to LINK and I went off for a week's rehabilitation with my husband and that was great it was really good, very supportive.

This, your feeling of depression, had that been gathering for some time or was it a relatively short experience?

I think it had been gathering for some time. And it was work-related in that work was becoming very difficult, mostly because I could not hear.

You mean because of your deafness or because of other factors?

Because of my deafness.

Yes, yes right tell me a little bit more about how it affected your work?

Well, on the phones the majority of my work at this time was negotiating contracts for all the artists, all the directors, the play directors who came, visiting companies, everybody; I negotiated the contracts for so I dealt with the financial aspects of it, the dates, confirmed the dates and everything and I worked through up until issuing contracts. I typed up all the contracts and sent them out so, the whole process was my responsibility. And it was all done by telephone. But then if you can't hear you have to start repeating or saying 'I am sorry what did you say?', or 'I didn't quite catch that', or rephrasing any amount of times that actually you cannot hear. It coincided with a time when we had a new telephone system in the theatre and I just assumed it was because the system was different, or I couldn't cope with the system or it wasn't as good a system. Which I don't think it was anyway, but that is another point. But the fact was I was losing my hearing and I had a new phone, I had an amplified phone with flashing lights so that I could see when it rang because I couldn't hear the bell. I could sort of hear with the amplification, but then I began to lose clarity, so that was pretty devastating as well. It was all right if I was looking at the light and saw the light flash, but if I couldn't hear what was being said then, you know, it was hopeless.

How long did this period of difficulty last, can you remember?

Well, I can't really remember. It seems like a very long time but the other thing that happened was that the theatre got into very difficult financial problems. It wasn't my fault although I did negotiate contracts (laughter).

I am sure it wasn't.

The programme there were difficulties with programming and with box office and that sort of thing and financially it was getting very, very hard and in effect the theatre eventually closed. There were a lot of political manoeuvrings as well which seemed to be evident and there was talk of a new performing arts centre being built, which has in fact happened now. But the

Haymarket closed 2003 and most of the staff were made redundant.

And you were still working there and coping at that point were you, or did you have to leave the job before that?

No, I was still working. I worked up till the end, I worked until 2003 when 80 of us were made redundant and there was what was called a skeleton staff left to run the building. Which conjured up visions of bones.

Thin people!

I think that is probably what it felt like to the people left behind. But when I was made redundant, that was when my life felt as if it had come to an end. Before then----

How was your career in the amateur theatre going at the time?

Well let me just say before moving on to then, that I found a very very.

Yes do?

I found a very accurate phrase to describe what was happening to me during the last bit of time at the Haymarket. It was like falling off the edge of the world. And in films it is sort of classic thing of an astronaut clinging on to the world or a spaceship or something and let's go and you see the astronaut it is very filmic you see the astronaut floating away towards some far distant planet or nowhere, a black hole, and that is what it felt like to me.

[54:37]

What were your domestic circumstances then?

I have always had a very good domestic life. My husband has always been very supportive and we have been very good together, we have had a very strong, very happy marriage. Very

romantic very silly, but we share our interests in theatre. We met quite by chance I suppose and perhaps this is worth just recounting, because again it was pretty special, I used to do folk and poetry, I used to do poet every evenings for anybody who want them, and my husband used to belong to a folk group, three lads doing folk, and a mutual friend of ours who was a youth leader decided to do a folk and poetry evening somewhere. So the plan was to meet at his flat then we would go to this venue. But at the time I didn't have a pacemaker, and so I toddled along to meet these people that I didn't really know too well at this flat that I didn't really know, but on the way there just outside I fainted and I actually collapsed and was unconscious. I came round on the bed of the youth leader, surrounded by four male faces. I slightly knew the youth leader, but I didn't know the others.

You had a choice then!

I did. I chose the best looking! One of them was in fact to be my husband and he was the one who came to see me in hospital when I came round and he has -- he has always had a moustache and beard and when I came round, everything was very fuzzy and not very clear, and the curtains were round my bed and it was a strange light on, I suppose that was because I was still partially unconscious, and I was told that when I came round I saw him and said 'fluffy', that is all I said. And that is my husband's nickname 'fluffy'.

So to go back to the difficult time more recently when the job finished and you were more/aware of your deafness you were going home at night to a sympathetic ear, am I right?

Yes, I was, I was. What I had not coped with, though, was being at home not getting up in the morning to go to work. But it also coincided with what had been the death of my father, the death of my mother, the death of my mother-in-law, the death of my father-in-law.

All in a short time you mean?

Over two years I had about two dozen bereavements of family and friends and I was very together about it, because I thought this is an opportunity for me to do my very best for our parents. So I did all the arrangements for the funeral, my buzz hand continued to work and

because I was used to dealing with setting things up if you lick it sounds a bit strange, but because I was able to deal with the business arrangements I did all that in a very proper manner.

[58:53]

Did you find that helped you with your stress and trauma?

It did yes it helped me no end, because it gave me something to focus on. And I felt that I was dealing with it very properly in a very business like way. And we did have our lighter moments with it and we were able to laugh at some of the things we had to do, some of the things were not funny actually but we did smile about them and we had a laugh I'm afraid to say, I am ashamed to say really, about choosing wood for the coffin. I mean for goodness sake it is awful, but you know it just we had to laugh because it was so awful it was such an awful thing to do. And we would imagine what our parents would make of it really, us all sort of rolling around the settee laughing and then them sternly looking up from above thinking 'this will not do at all'. So we did have our moments, but then afterwards I realised actually I had rather few friends left because a few of them had died and when I was made redundant, having no job to go to I suddenly realised I was actually rather lonely and my family, I didn't have a family any more, apart from my daughter we have a daughter a wonderful daughter who is very supportive.

Were you able to talk to people in a social situation?

Not really, no.

Not even like this?

No.

All right?

No.

That must have been quite difficult how did you feel about that?

I kind of got on with it. I got on with the things I had to do. I was following the demise of the theatre and although I didn't talk to anybody about it, I used to read all the newspaper articles about it and I cut them all out and kept them because I thought it was an interesting process to go through. I was not personally involved in that way except that it - I felt very possessive about the theatre because I had been an important part of the team there. Or part of the team there. And when I was at the theatre there was a very strong sense of team, particularly at the very beginning and that was when the theatre was at its most successful. Latterly I don't think it was, I didn't feel that it was because I think that it had strayed from its local working for the people who would support it and that was partly its problem, because people actually felt it was not offering them the sort of things they wanted to see. But that is a personal view. But I did follow its fall as you might say. But then I put that aside and I thought whatever follows, which was the performing arts centre which is now called 'curve' I felt that was not anything to do with me, although the initial ideas were tossed around to the staff at the Haymarket it never felt anything to do with me. Although I was - I have would have been interested to start with something new given that I had been at the Phoenix then moved to the Haymarket, so it would naturally follow that I would then be interested in the next stage. But I didn't feel that it was anything to do with me so I stopped at that point. And that was when I felt that I was no longer a professional theatre worker. But, I still had my amateur theatre to go to fortunately. Because without that I don't know what I would have done.

[01:03:33]

And you had more time for it now?

Yes I do, I made more time. I did have a year off last year, I have always managed to direct a play because I moved from being an actress when I was about 23 I think I had my daughter,

when I played in *The Rivals* I played Lydia languish I think it was, and I played it at the Little Theatre then we took it on tour to Lamport Hall which is in the county, but by that time I was six or 7 months pregnant, so my dress we had to wear a core set for or costumes and my core set was on its fullest gap at the back. So I was rather a large Lydia languish. But I was a tiny person anyway fortunately so I looked just the same size as everyone else.

What is your relationship now with the what did you call them, is it called the guild theatre?

The little theatre. I now direct plays.

Yes?

And I have directed as it happens I have directed plays since 1997.

What about now, this year or?

I am going to be directing a play in August called *The Shell Seekers* from a novel from Rosamunde Pilcher and I start rehearsing in August. So after this weekend I have got to get cracking.

When is the performance?

The performances are at the end of September. And we have six weeks rehearsal.

[01:05:30]

Oh right. Can we move on to your going back to your experience with the hearing therapist and I think you said that is how you got in touch with LINK. Tell me about your initial experiences with LINK?

Yes, on the rehabilitation course my husband and I went. Unfortunately my daughter could not because she had exams. And I think that was a great shame, because it took her a long,

long time to come to terms with my deafness.

I personally have no experience of this course, could you describe it for me, what actually happens?

Yes. There are sessions which are geared to all kinds of things, all kind of problems that you might face. It is about coping, it is about communication, it is largely about those. And it was helping -- we were in a small group of about 10 or 12 of us as I remember, some had husbands, some were single. And we all came from a different background so it was very useful to hear other people's problems, how they became deafened and how they were coping or not coping. Mostly they were not coping. And all our fears were thrashed out and it was a very honest week and we all had to tell the truth in front of each other and in front of our husbands, wives or whatever it was. And we were advised how we might deal with these, given strategies to consider. And at times the hearing partners were taken away into another room and had different sort of programme to discuss. We perhaps discussed things that were very personal to us and they perhaps things that were very personal to them. But it was very hard work, very tiring, very emotional. There were a lot of tears.

What can you remember learning specifically about yourself and your husband's relationship, sorry I meant your relationship with your husband. I didn't put that very well.

My relationship with my husband.

What was his reaction?

His reaction was one of total support. And I suppose we know how affected we are, each of us, by the deafness. The deafness is something that is totally unwanted. It is something that you actually cannot get rid of, in my case I have tinnitus and that is loud noise all the time and that just gets in the way of everything. So you cannot have an intimate conversation, because you can't hear. So bang goes the evening for two in candle light with light background music, you don't have that any more. You can't have the jokes that you used to have so you miss out on the fun. You can't share gossip any more, you can't whisper wicked things about

people without them hearing. A whole lot of things, and a whole lot of awfulnesses and if you want to shout at somebody, if you want to shout at your husband, or him at me, that takes on a whole different aspect because it comes -- it be meaningful when actually at other times you say something that you don't mean to say and then you can quickly say well actually I did not mean that I meant something else or just change it round and it is not so easy when you are deaf because you can't tell immediately what sort of effect you have had except you can see the deep hurt and then it is too late and you are upset yourself because you know the depth of hurt that you have caused. But it's so wounding to you both and there is nothing you can do because it is too late.

Yes.

And there are so many of those sort of things, you know. But my daughter suffered the most because she didn't -- she simply could'nt understand why I could not hear her. And why I didn't understand her feelings and what she was saying. But she does now, but it took a great many years and also at that time she was under a lot of stress from exams. I think it was GCSEs.

How old is she now?

She is actually 27 now.

Is she still at home, no?

No she is not. She is a teacher. She lives in York and works in Hull, in Beverley so she is independent. But not because of being unable to stand the situation at home, but because she needed to get away and I -- we both encouraged her to go because we believe in independence. I am a very independent person and I suppose this was my greatest loss when I lost my hearing. I became, I am not independent anymore I have to rely on my husband and if he is not around then I am a lost person. And it is very hard to explain that.

Not hard no. I understand.

[01:12:56]

But you have become quite active with LINK I understand?

Yes I have.

Tell me about that?

After I had been made redundant, which was the key thing in my life I suppose, I realised that I had a very pathetic looking CV to try to find work. I was very keen to find work but I found that apart from working for 34 years of theatre I had nothing to show for it in the real world so I decided that I had better do something about it so I went on all kinds of courses, I did management studies, I was going to set up my own firm I was going to do so much for the world but in the end I realised that I was actually someone who needed to be part of an organisation, part of a team. So I thought well I'll brush up my various other skills which I did and I worked very hard and I have got a pretty good CV now, though I say it myself. And I got a job, but it didn't last because I had to go into hospital for longer than I know thought and when I came out I really was not good for much. So my job ended and I had a couple of temp jobs. They were the only ones I could get and then the firm closed, so I have now reached 60 and so in theory I ought to be retired, but sort of early retirement, but I am in the ready to retire and I think there is still plenty of go in me. But that is on the side really. Link came at a time after the rehabilitation, I was not going to be involved in LINK any more, but I got a letter from them some years later and they were starting a project on deafened awareness training. And I was at a real low ebb having no work, no prospects. And I said to my husband well, I think I am going to write off for this just to see what it is. And they can always say no, you know, that is the worst thing. So I wrote off and Geoff Jones who was organising the project said he read my details and said I would like to come to Leicester to meet and talk with you. So he came, and I was amazed that he didn't say come down to Eastbourne. But he came to Leicester and we had a really, really lovely meeting. And he said well I don't think officially I am supposed to tell you but yes I would like you to be on the team. So I was on the team and we had a sort of training session, which went very well and

then we went off and did our training. The first bit of time we did three hour presentations to hearing voluntary community groups on a volunteer basis. We were just paid expenses, we were not paid a fee or anything. And we talked to groups, to small groups of about 12 or something like that on the full range of being deafened. Communicating with, these were all hearing people and we talked about how to communicate with people, the sort of equipment you could get, how to make meetings easier, a little bit about the Disability Discrimination Act. The whole range of things really. We had slide shows and Powerpoint projections.

You say we, how many of you were involved with each event?

There were about 6 of us, six trainers and we were sent out in pairs, except I...

So two people?

Yes.

Uh huh?

To each presentation.

Can you remember the first time you did this, how did you feel about it?

I did one at a women's refuge and I did it on my own.

Yes?

And they only wanted an hour fortunately. So, it was a real challenge the reason I decided to go for the project was because it was a challenge. I didn't know if it was something I could do. And I think that is possibly something I have always had in mind at the back of my mind, the reason I do what I do is because it is a challenge. And I don't accept the easy way of life if you like.

Did it work, did it work for you?

Yes. I found it very difficult to start with at the refuge particularly, because I felt they were being -- I sensed an atmosphere of being very guarded. But actually as I talked it was clear, and I knew as soon as I was saying it, that the things I talked about were things that they knew about in a different sort of way. So, that things when I talked about barriers being down, and lack of communication, these were things that the women had actually experienced and they knew about those. So, they could think about them in their own light and I think that possibly helped them quite a bit. And I think their report back their feedback was actually quite good. So that gave me heart to carry on. But I was committed to the project.

Yes, so what was your feeling when -- at the end of that first encounter with the women and the refuge when it was all wrapped up when you were on your way home?

I was very pleased to have done it. I had been very nervous very frightened of doing it because I knew nothing about women's a women's refuge really. I had a very happy and sheltered life, so it wasn't part of my knowledge. But, I felt that it had been a success and it had given me a totally different experience to one I had had -- what I had had before. But it had given me a lot of confidence to stand up in front of a group of people and talk about something I knew. Intimately.

[01:20:14]

How did you cope with the discussion at those meetings?

At that particular meeting there weren't discussions as such but subsequently there were. And I found this varied really. Some people were very good at lip speaking, and were very easy to understand. Other people muttered terribly and under their bears and didn't move their lips and that sort of thing. So, part of what we did was to get somebody to come and act as a scribe to write down the questions or the comments on a board for everybody to see. So, that the people attending could understand the problems that we faced by not understanding what was being said. So that was very useful. And it was useful to them and to us obviously. But

because we were in charge of the presentation, it was easier for us because we were talking to them and we were involving them. We had like little games whereby they had head sets with tinnitus to listen to and then their partners read them a little piece and they had to answer questions on the piece. Well of course they couldn't understand what was being said. So, they learned what it was like to have tinnitus. And I did a presentation with someone who had a stick because they had balance problems, so they could see what it was like not to be able to have balance because of hearing loss. Other people there was another person who was not middle class white, like myself I suppose. So it was interesting for them to see what it was like dealing with a foreigner, foreign people have hearing loss as well. So, it was a really well organised and well set up project. It was lottery funded and it was a three year project and at the end of three years it finished because there was no more money. But it was a fantastic project, the potential was enormous and it just seems wicked that it cannot carry on because we had been to so many places I personally had been to ten presentations I had done ten sessions. And everybody was so excited about what we said, and they had learned such a lot and said I know there is group you must talk to about this, it is so and so we will get them to contact LINK. So, there was a lot of interest coming in.

What did it do for you?

It gave me back confidence. A lot of the confidence that I had lost. It made me stand up and talk to people that I would never have done before. I mean, with my theatre knowledge and background, that is something I have always done. But when I lost my job I didn't want to do that any more, because I felt so beaten down. But the project brought me up again, so I felt new and different. But after that, when the project had finished, I said 'keep me in mind for when it starts again because it must start again when there is some more money in the pot'. But for the next project whatever it is I would like to be considered. So, when this project, the Unheard Voices came up, I put my name down straightaway and asked to be interest interviewed for it and I came for an interview and was chosen for training. So I went along and trained and had a fantastic time. I loved it and I thought this is something I want to do.

[01:24:52]

You describe very graphically the problems that deafness brings to you in your social and domestic life and how depressing it was for you. How do you feel about it now?

It comes and goes I suppose to be honest. When I get tired, that is when I get very stressed about being deaf. Because I know I will never be the person that I was. But on the other hand, I have had so many plus points since the awfulness of losing my job and I think well maybe life is not so bad after all you know. There are one or two other things. And my daughter is fantastic and so supportive now have although I have to say she has decided to go on, she is giving up her job and going travelling for at least six months around the world with her boyfriend, so I am not sure whether I our relationship is that good. But I am pleased for her obviously. But yes, this project is good for me.

What about the poetry reading? Poetry.

The poetry readings I am sorry to say have taken a back seat, but that is because I spend all my free time now at the theatre being not only a play director but I just been elected to be a trustee at the Little Theatre, which is like one of the directors of a company really. So, I am having to turn my hand to all kinds of other things, like financial things and strategic things and infrastructure and all those long words that are new to me. But, I think that might be very interesting, because that will be a different thing for me to do. And I have some knowledge of that area of work obviously through the level of work that I did at the theatre, but it will be different and it will ask new things of me. And it will be a challenge, I think. The difficulty of course will be in the communication. I have been to one meeting so far, and I was lucky to get somebody as a laptop typist. She was not officially a Speech To Text Recorder but she did the same sort of thing, although a little slower and not quite so accurately. But it was a great help.

What is the reaction of your fellow trustees to your deafness I mean?

Some of them knew. Some of them didn't, but before the meeting I actually typed up a net of some of the things that I used in the deafened awareness training presentation about how to deal with deafened people, communication tactics, basic things like looking directly at people

when you speak to them, not looking away, speaking clearly, slowly, and enunciating.

How did they respond?

Quite well, quite well. Well at least nobody came to me and said 'what is all this rubbish?', so... they were very good and the meeting went very well I think from my point of view certainly. I mean, I need to e-mail them when I get home and say thank you very much for helping me through the meeting, I hope you didn't find it too traumatic or whatever.

Are you the only deaf person involved in the trustees?

Yes.

Uh huh?

Yes. I think it was something new to them. I don't think they had really considered it. I have to say we have had a new infrared system within the theatre, because the loop system died.

Yes?

So.

They usually do!

The infrared system, I actually pushed for it there had been some talk about it so I said well actually you have got to have it if you have not got a loop system you have got to have infrared.

Does that help you personally?

I thought it did and it was first used for a play that I did. So I knew the play rather well, so I dutifully turned up at every performance with my hearing system loop on. But the infrared

system on. But in actual fact I have to say that it wasn't as good as I hoped and I believe that it is actually better for hard of hearing people than it is for profoundly deafened people. I found that a lot of the electrical noises were picked up and because I have not got the clarity it did not seem to help me for that so...

[01:30:53]

Let's just have the pause now because I want to look at my notes to remind myself of what we are supposed to cover?

Record.

Play. What else would you like to tell me about your experience of deafness?

Well, I could talk at great length about being deaf obviously. Because it is such a particular loss.

That is what we are here for.

Indeed, yes. I think people forget hearing people have no idea what it is like and if you try to explain to them they do not really understand and then they forget. And they speak very quickly, which makes it very difficult. And they speak not very well for deafened people which is very frustrating and very distressing and very isolating at the end of the day. I have to say that had you had this interview three weeks ago with me, I would have got into more overwrought a state than I have today. But on 20th March I had some new hearing aids and they are geared the people with acquired profound hearing loss and I can hear much better now than I could before.

Right?

So a lot of what you said I have been able to pick up and some conversations I am really pretty good at. So, I am very proud of them and very excited to have them. And I just hope

that the fact that I have got some offer hope to people who have not yet found the right hearing aids for themselves. I know some people have cochlear implants, because of my medical background, my medical history I do not think I would be able to have cochlear implants because of the medication I have. But I think with the advancement of medical science, I think there will eventually be some kind of answer for deafened people in the short or long-term. And that is my hope for everyone.

Apart from implants, there are lots of other technological devices, do you have any of them?

Yes, I do. I have a loop system at home, I have television text, I have a uniphone which I hate and I cannot get used to because I find the operator technique just gets in the way.

Explain to us what a uniphone is?

You dial your number and the operator answers and puts you us through to someone, I think. And then I have never actually been able to get the hang of it because it is so -- it does not follow my logic with phones at all. But you get through to an operator you speak to the person, and then the operator types back what they say and the message appears on a little screen on your phone.

Do you have a keyboard do you?

You have a keyboard numbers and letters and then you have a little window where the message appears. But I find it really difficult. It is possibly because I sometimes pick up half what is being said and lose the rest of the message. And it is such a long time to actually cope with it, and my brain is keen to get on and I lose patience in the end. And I have actually tried it several times and put the phone down because I get so distressed and distraught with it, but that is me I am afraid.

[01:35:30]

Have you been to definitely that a cochlear implant is not an option?

I was offered a cochlear implant, I was offered the chance to discuss it and I said no. Because I have a pacemaker with is an implant, and I have to have that changed when the batteries run out which is at the moment touch wood on a good battery is every ten years. The last time I had a pacemaker, I came round, I had a very unpleasant experience after the anaesthetic and I had to be put back on to the ventilator and it was very complicated and things went wrong and I think that would be a problem for me to have another anaesthetic. I don't know, but I just think I have enough on my plate to have something else to worry about really. It sounds a bit ungrateful, but the consultant did say 'come back if you change your mind', but I just feel I probably will not change my mind. I would rather have some nice new bright shiny hearing aids than have something actually implanted in my head. I am sure there is lots of room in my head for it, but I would rather not I think.

No, I understand.

But the other thing I have is of course email and that is the very best thing that has happened to me in my life really I think as far as communication is concerned. Since I have been deafened.

Do you have a mobile phone?

Yes I do have a mobile phone.

Do you use text then?

I use it, but because it is so small I can only write very briefly. Whereas with an email I can write really long letters. And I do. I used the as I said before I used to write letters to all my friends. But now, with regards to the theatre, I can write all my letters and long notes to all my actors and my technicians I have a wonderful time. I spend hours on the machine. It is quite a loan he sad sort of life buff I have a lovely time sending them all the contents of my head really.

Do you get replies?

Sometimes.

[01:38:00]

Well, I am going to pause again. I am going to ask you once more if there is anything else you would like to tell me.

I don't think there is anything specific that I want to say, except to thank you very much for making the interview such fun and.

You shouldn't be thanking me. I realise now how much more the interviewee' puts into these things and I am most grateful for you sharing these experiences with me thank you very much indeed.

[End of recording]