

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Hobson, Harold – interview transcript

Interviewer: Dominic Shellard

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Theatre Critic; Writing for the Christian Science Monitor; Writing for the Sunday Times; Osborne and Look Back in Anger; process of reviewing plays; Sartre; Peter Hall and Waiting for Godot; Christopher Fry; political theatre.

DS: When you left Oxford, how did you come to write for the Christian Science Monitor?

HH: There was an undergraduate at Oxford, Irwin Cannon, who subsequently became the editor of the Monitor, who then occupied a subsidiary position and he introduced me to the editor of the Monitor who came over from America on a business trip and I wrote a speculative article for them and they asked me to write another and I did so and gradually increased the number of contributions which I made. When I came down I was earning enough from the Monitor as a freelance writer to take it up as a profession. I went to Sheffield, stayed in Sheffield for a couple of years, then came to London about 1930 and kept on as a freelance writer for several years. Then I joined the staff of the paper about 1935 and so that was how it happened.

DS: When you first started to write for the CSM, why did you start to write the editorials, was that a suggestion of Irwin Cannon?

HH: I wrote the editorials because there happened to be a gap in the English staff of the paper, giving an opportunity for writing editorials.

DS: There are two further questions to that. In your editorials, it demonstrates your great knowledge of history, which I assume is attributable to the fact that you studied history at Oxford. That seems to me one of your greatest interests. Secondly, increasingly theatrical issues come to the fore, so for example you talk about drama in schools or the need for a national theatre, and I wondered if that was a conscious decision on your part to write more about the theatre, or were you just reacting to the feeling of the times, was there a greater interest in theatre?

HH: I'd always been deeply interested in the theatre. The Playhouse then at Oxford was one of the leading theatres in Great Britain. Flora Robson, John Gielgud, Tyrone Guthrie, Richard Goolden were all members of the company, so I went to see them quickly and

the theatre being a very deep interest of mine it gradually surfaced and I began to write about the theatre, but there was no conscious decision. The London editor of the Monitor noticed my devotion to the theatre and said to me one day, 'if you write a review of Jack Buchanan in, I think it was Stand Up And Sing, and it's printed in the Monitor we will pay you for your seat', and that was how my professional association with the theatre began.

DS: Can you remember when that was, approximately?

HH: 1931.

DS: I read in Indirect Journey about your interest in Oxford in the theatre. Would you say you regularly went to the Playhouse?

HH: Yes.

DS: Was it in the Woodstock Road ?

HH: Yes, Big Game Museum.

DS: And a lot of your early editorials and work on the theatre for the CSM refer to Oxford productions, OUDS productions. Did you often go back to Oxford or was that just the fashion that Oxford productions were generally important?

HH: I think it was more a fashion, I didn't return to Oxford very often.

DS: I've just read a review of Milton's Samson Agonistes that you wrote and I think it was set in the Fellows' Garden of Exeter College and that was interesting because it obviously contained lots of memories for you and this came over powerfully in the writing. I think one of the things that occurs to me about your criticism, without unduly praising you, really, is that you're very good at creating the atmosphere of the work and letting people have an immediate inkling as to what they're going to see. Would you say that is a fair comment about your work?

HH: What is that?

DS: That when you read a piece of theatrical criticism by Sir Harold Hobson you get an immediate evocation of the emotional atmosphere of the play. It's more than you just saying, it's about this, this, this and this - you get some kind of feeling about the emotions that are going to be experienced.

HH: Well, this was a part of the foundation of my work. My theory of the theatre was that each visit to the theatre something happens, something happens to the critic's mind and heart and the thing becomes sort of historically dense and therefore my criticisms, I should say, are records of how I happened to feel at a particular evening at a particular play, that they are the foundation of a historical record more than the passing of a judgment. They are the narration of something that happened to me in the theatre rather than a judgment passed on the merits of the things I was seeing.

DS: Do you think that stems from your training as a historian?

HH: I think probably it does, yes.

DS: How do you think your training helped you in your work as a critic?

HH: A historian records what happens to him when he considers certain events in history and writes that down I regarded what was happening to me in the theatre as the basis for a historic record.

DS: Can I move on to just before the war? I'm not quite sure exactly when you started to write for the Sunday Times, it wasn't very clear to me from reading Indirect Journey. I remember reading the anecdote about you phoning up the board of education to find out where your then wife was going to be evacuated to and you telephoned the Sunday Times because you had some information that you gleaned. Was that your first encounter with the Sunday Times?

HH: It was, yes.

DS: When you submitted this article, what kind of things did you write after this?

HH: Chiefly book reviews.

DS: When did you first meet the Sunday Times critic then, James Agate?

HH: In 1945 I first began to write reviews.

DS: As his deputy, was it?

HH: Yes.

DS: Then he died in 1947 and you took over, and that's where these reviews come into it?

HH: Yes.

DS: I did an English degree as an undergraduate and I did a drama paper, and one of the things that we'd often talk about in our lectures and in our seminars is about the 'Big Bang' theory in English theatre in 1956 and how *Look Back In Anger* came and there was a new direction of plays. Something that struck me in reading your reviews in 1947 and 1948 is that there seems to me this yearning for some change of direction, although it's not specified in your writing and it seems to learn toward the French experience, the works of Sartre and existentialism. Would that be a fair comment, do you think?

HH: Yes, I think it would.

DS: How could you characterise your dissatisfaction with post-war British theatre, the stuff you were seeing in London?

HH: It was too frivolous, too exclusively upper middle class. It ignored the existence of nine-tenths of the world - more than nine-tenths.

DS: It's very interesting, I've read one of your articles in the CSM in 1931 and you were saying the same thing then.

HH: Was I?

DS: Which I thought showed great foresight, actually, because there was at one point, the talkies came over, the movies, and this is a preoccupation in 1930, what's it going to mean for the theatre, and one of the immediate things it meant was that prices came down. I can't remember now, think you could buy a stall seat for eight shillings six and it went down to four shillings two.

HH: Oh yes.

DS: And there is an editorial you wrote called 'Democracy in the Theatre' and you were applauding this idea, and I thought that was an interesting foresight.

HH: Yes, I'd forgotten that.

DS: And was wondering that whether after a year the prices went up again when the realised the theatre had nothing to worry about.

HH: Yes.

DS: This is just a theory that I have about your writing, I think it shows great foresight in 1947 and 1948 particularly, and this carries on and I think it's quite misleading to say that this 'Big Bang' was totally unexpected because there does seem to be this hint in your writing anyway of this dissatisfaction.

HH: The new writing introduced by Christopher Fry and Ted Whitehead three or four years before the Osborne explosion.

DS: To what would you trace your interest in French theatre?

HH: Chiefly from visits to Paris. I wound the day up by going to the theatre and was deeply impressed by Sartre and by Anouilh.

DS: So you had possession of the French language, then?

HH: Yes.

DS: When these French plays first started to come over to Britain, were they performed in the Lyric Hammersmith, was that the foremost place for these plays?

HH: That I'd forgotten.

DS: I just wondered, there seemed to be quite a lot of reviews, particularly of Sartre plays, that were based on the Lyric Hammersmith that you went to see in '47 and '48 and I just wondered whether that was a policy of the theatre, or not that you can remember?

HH: Yes, I think it was a policy in the theatre, it was really an anticipation of the movement in the British theatre towards the study of political questions.

DS: Did that mirror a greater interest in politics on the part of the general public or did you think that was something that the theatre itself was leading?

HH: I think it was the theatre itself.

DS: We'll move on now to Look Back In Anger. I've read most of the reviews of the other critics and only you and Kenneth Tynan appeared to support the play. One interesting point in Indirect Journey is that you were voraciously well-read, you read

everything about the theatre, articles, other dramatic criticism. Can you remember what your reaction was to these adverse criticisms to *Look Back In Anger* and whether you felt provoked by them to write a defence of it or was it entirely your own personal reaction to the play?

HH: Both, I think, but it is particularly like a critic to come across a play which he thinks is extremely good, which is a memorable experience for him, and to find that it's happened to nobody else.

DS: Can you remember any other plays like that?

HH: Well, principally *The Birthday Party*, in which I was the only London critic to praise at its first production.

DS: One more thing about *Look Back In Anger*, this brings me back to Kenneth Tynan, who was very interesting to read in his biography that you actually introduced the young Kenneth Tynan at Oxford to your publishers, which is something that I don't think is actually very well known, so in a sense you could have been said to have started him on his career, is that correct?

HH: I recommended him to Longmans.

DS: And what were your relations at that point and after that? They always seem to be very cordial - well, that's the impression I got from the biography?

HH: They were very friendly, although he moved in entirely different circles.

DS: How would you compare your criticism to his brand of criticism, which has been followed by some and rejected by others?

HH: I think Kenneth Tynan became obsessed by Brecht and his influence was paramount in Kenneth's career, whereas I don't think there was any particular author who dominated all the rest in my view.

DS: What is your view of Brecht as a playwright, can you remember when you first came across him?

HH: I saw the first production of Brecht, *Mother Courage*, which was at Barnstaple of all places, at the Devon Festival in 1956, would it be? yes, and I was impressed but not as impressed as Kenneth Tynan. I never became as obsessed by Brecht as Kenneth was or as most progressive critics were.

DS: Yes, so we've got up to the 1960s now. I'm interested in your relationship with the National Theatre, could you tell me how that came about, how you were invited onto - was it the board of the National Theatre in the 1960s?

HH: I was a friend of Peter Hall because I had welcomed *Waiting for Godot*, Tynan and I were the only two critics who appreciated it when it was first produced and I kept up a sporadic acquaintance with Peter and he invited me to the board.

DS: What was your function on the board?

HH: Very little, I just listened to the wise men who ran the theatre.

DS: This is a very general question about theatre in the '60s but could you say something about how you saw the general direction after *Look Back In Anger*? Did it disappoint you the way it became quite obsessed with politics and sexuality?

HH: I think it was, yes, it forgot the merits of the old theatre and it became at one stage really just a series of political pamphlets, a matter of political propaganda.

DS: Can you think of any examples of that?

HH: Well, I think the plays of West were, the plays of Brecht were, the plays of Sartre were.

DS: So the ones of Sartre and Brecht were used by people for their own political aims?

HH: I think so.

DS: And West was propounding his own political philosophy?

HH: Yes.

DS: We talked about the CSM and Sunday Times up to and including the '60s. Can you say something about other articles you wrote, other journals you wrote for? I know that you wrote for Drama magazine.

HH: Have I directed? No, I've had not practical experience of work in the theatre, I've been exclusively an outsider. As I say, my chief interest was in recording what happened to me in the theatre as a historical event rather than as a manifestation of theatrical theory.

DS: That's very interesting. Can you say something about the other journals that you wrote for, apart from the Sunday Times and the CSM. I've managed to locate some work in Drama magazine.

HH: I wrote for Drama and I wrote for The Listener, but they never played a dominant part in my work.

DS: Can I ask you now about a typical week that you had at the Sunday Times when you were its chief critic? I'm interested in your process of writing. Could you possibly talk me through a typical week from Monday through to Sunday, if that's possible.

HH: Well, there were plays on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, new productions in the West End, so Monday was a free day, Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday were always working day in which I went to the theatre and sometime to the Wednesday matinees as well. Then on Friday morning I wrote an article and submitted it and it was generally accepted.

DS: So was your deadline Friday evening, then?

HH: Friday afternoon.

DS: And how did you deliver your copy, did you deliver it personally or did you dictate it over the telephone?

HH: I delivered it personally for many years, in fact until the very end of my career I delivered it personally.

DS: We're up to 1968 now. What effect do you think all the student uprisings in May 1968 had on the British theatre, if any?

HH: Well, they consolidated the political outlook of the theatre and its interest in politics matters, and they also strengthened the revolt against the upper-class theatre which we'd been accustomed to for many years.

DS: Into the 1970s, how would you categorise this last period of your stewardship at the Sunday Times? Is there anything that sticks out as particularly memorable, those last six years?

HH: Political figures begun to decline, part of the traditional qualities of the theatre returned and there was a partial revolt against the 1956 rebellion. Also there came the

dominance of Sam Beckett in the theatre whose interest was not in politics but in entirely other matters, his own personal reaction to life.

DS: When did you decide to retire?

HH: 1976.

DS: And did you carry on writing after that?

HH: I continued writing in Drama.

DS: Looking back over your stewardship of the Sunday Times, which period would you consider to be the so-called 'Golden Era', over the drama that you've witnessed as a historical document, which has given you most satisfaction?

HH: The 1960s when the beginning of a change came in the writings of Christopher Fry and it was consolidated by John Osborne and culminated in the work of Harold Pinter.

DS: When was the last time you went to the theatre, Sir Harold?

HH: Three or four years, now.

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DS: I'm interested in the relationship between agents, actors, managers, critics. Did you have any contact with theatrical agents of actors, were there any that stand out in your memory?

HH: No, I don't know any celebrated theatrical agent.

DS: What about theatre managers?

HH: Theatre managers I don't know at all well.

DS: So would you say that when you mixed with the theatrical world it was solely with directors, producers and actors?

HH: Yes.

DS: Who are your favourite actors?

HH: Ralph Richardson was my favourite actor, he gave me more pleasure than any other actor that I've seen. And Edwige Feuillère was a great idol of mine in Paris .

DS: Was that Sir Ralph Richardson?

HH: Yes.

DS: Can I ask you now, if I say some particular roles who you felt was most impressive in those roles?

HH: Richardson was particularly impressive; Olivier of course was very impressive in Oedipus, and again in Richard III. Edwige Feuillère was particularly impressive in Partage de Midi by Claudel in the part of Ysé. I think they are three of the most impressive performances that I've seen.